SEA OF THIEVES 10 THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW

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VIVE PRO
THE FUTURE OF VR?

TIME TO SWITCH

PILLARS OF ETERNITY II: DEADFIRE
How Obsidian is adding some pirate flair to its new RPG

FAR CRY 5 HANDS-ON VERDICT
We embrace the fire, fury and farce of Ubisoft insane shooter

28 MUST-PLAY GAMES FOR 2018
+ SWITCH'S HIDDEN GEMS + WHY DEVS LOVE NINTENDO'S CONSOLE
+ DOES LABO KILL THE PLASTIC PERIPHERAL?

HIGHLIGHTS
GOD OF WAR ■ THE OCCUPATION ■ GOROGOA ■ IN THE VALLEY OF GODS ■ WARGROOVE
DRAGONBALL FIGHTERZ ■ PURRFECT DATE ■ LIFE IS STRANGE: BEFORE THE STORM
MONSTER HUNTER: WORLD ■ TOTAL WAR: THREE KINGDOMS ■ MARIO TENNIS ACES
PLAYERUNKNOWN'S BATTLEGROUNDS ■ SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS ■ LOST SPHEAR



ISSUE 197

A phrase I find myself saying a lot more than I imagined I would is, 'I'll wait to play that when it arrives on Switch'. Why? Not because of the fidelity, of course, or the control feeling any better. It's simply because if a game is on the Switch I know I can play it anywhere and at any time.

This has been especially true of indie games where the art style and engine behind the game means that it makes no great difference to the experience whether I'm playing it in 720p on the Switch or 4K on the Xbox One X. In these circumstances I can find the time in my day on Switch to pick up on the smaller titles and fill out my day with games. I used to spend a lot of time playing iOS games for much the same reason, but now the Switch is what occupies my spare time.

And while it is undoubtedly the big hitters, like Mario and Zelda, that have drawn in most Switch buyers in its first year on sale – surpassing, by some estimations, the first year sales of the PS4 – it's the everyday experience of the Switch and how it bridges the gap between playing at home and playing on the move that has really captured the imagination. And all of this without a massive amount of triple-A third-party support, which given its first year is bound to be coming.

I suspected the Switch would do well and had high hopes for its big exclusives, but I wouldn't have been able to predict this first year with any great confidence. I'm very excited to see where it goes next.

Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR




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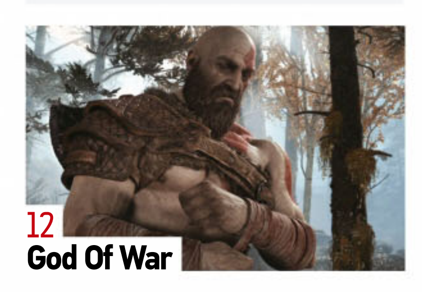
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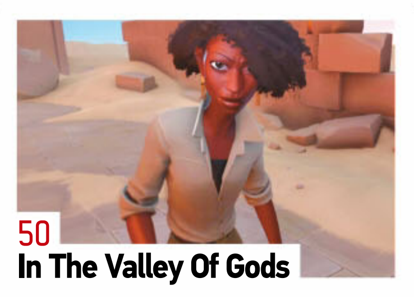


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TIME TO SWITCH

We invite developers to reflect on the incredible first year of the Nintendo Switch, explore Nintendo Labo and detail the 28 biggest games coming in 2018



"THE RETURN TO CROWDFUNDING HAS SEEN THE OBSIDIAN TEAM ONCE AGAIN WORKING AWAY FROM THE WATCHFUL GAZE OF A PUBLISHER"

THE WAIT ISN'T SO LONG FOR PILLARS OF ETERNITY II: DEADFIRE

→ OBSIDIAN SHOWS AND WE PLAY ITS LATEST TO GET AN IDEA OF THE UPCOMING CRPG'S NAUTICAL THEME

FORMAT: PC, MAC, LINUX | PUBLISHER: VERSUS EVIL | PLAYERS: 1
DEVELOPER: OBSIDIAN ENTERTAINMENT | RELEASE: 3 APRIL 2018

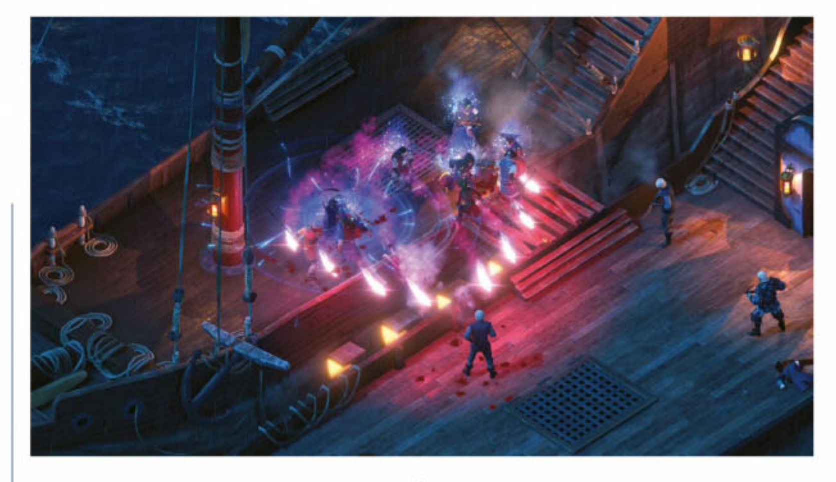
When you make around $4 million offering up a game on Kickstarter and it proceeds to sell around a million copies in total when it's completed and released, it might seem a bit… presumptuous, shall we say, to go back to that particular well. But it's just what Obsidian Entertainment did, returning to crowdfunding – this time on equity-offering Kickstarter competitor Fig – for *Pillars Of Eternity II: Deadfire*. Few were surprised when the sequel was funded, however many eyebrows were raised when it blasted through the record-setting amount raised by the first game, landing at $4.4m when the funding campaign ended.

We asked Josh Sawyer, design director on *Deadfire*, for his thoughts on why a return to the crowdfunded backer beta route is the one Obsidian has stuck with. "For me there's always ways to improve on the stuff that we've done before," he explains. "And so for the challenge and the excitement for me is trying to push that and say, 'Okay, we did this, this worked pretty well, but what if it could be better? What can we do to really up the ante on that?' And there are certain things that we do where I think people are definitely going to love it, and then it goes up on the backer beta and people are like, 'We do not like this'. And we have to step back and think why did they not like it? This is how it's presented, is it how it actually works in practice? What's the problem? And then roll back and try to work on it that way."

A backer beta was released to those who'd put in enough cash in the crowdfunding phase, and feedback has generally been positive. The game is very much another *Pillars* title – that is, a classically styled CRPG with real-time combat and incredible depth to its dialogue and other systems. For a quick and easy comparison for non-genre fans, think something like Dragon Age's tactical combat, but with a lot more depth – and a high difficulty level for the uninitiated. *Deadfire* has moved from the European-style classic fantasy setting of the original to a Pacific Island-inspired Deadfire Archipelago, charging you to hunt a reawakened god. Naturally.

This move to an island-hopping adventure requires a different stronghold to the one seen in the original *Pillars*, so players are kitted out instead with a ship ready to sail the waters between each of the archipelago's islands. This mobile stronghold is much improved over the homestead of the first game, and players can upgrade and customise the good ship Boaty McDeadfire however they see fit – from hiring and firing crew, sourced from NPCs and each with their own stats and abilities, through to flying false colours in order to infiltrate hostile waters or just spark up an oceanic brawl. Customisation is key, and Obsidian is really pushing hard to make your ship feel very much like *your ship*. A place you can call home, wherever it might be anchored.

This ship management, as well as ship combat (and many other features) had not yet been added to the backer beta – at the time of writing – but we were able to have a look at what to expect in the finished game. Of course, with a nautical theme comes the inevitable ship-to-ship combat and piratical antics harking back to Errol Flynn – though with a bit more bloodshed and magic. As you make your way around the wet and bobbing world map, other ships will be encountered. Enter combat – though you might not, of course – and you're »



met with a turn-based tactical minigame that allows you to play to your strengths (or hide your weaknesses). Do you have a floating fortress with a dozen cannons and reinforced broadside? Swoop in so you're side-on and blast the enemy to the bottom of the sea. Are you sailing more of a pacey number without much in the way of armaments? Close in, engage ramming speed and – brilliantly – get involved with some melee combat as you board the enemy. At first, it doesn't sound like it fits the world established by the original *Pillars*, but soon enough you're lost in this new world of fantasy, and all concerns melt away.

Even without the full feature set to hand, though, there are plenty of players already involved through the aforementioned backer beta. Feedback for the beta continually arrives at Obsidian, be it from direct messages, social media feedback, in-game telemetry or anything else. While Sawyer admits it can be difficult to sort the valuable from less valuable feedback, he did say that Obsidian had become better at taking things on board and making changes accordingly – but there's still work to be done. "We're still not tutorialising it as well as I think we need to," he says. "That's always a challenge is that, with a system this complex and this big, we have to do a lot of work for that. But I think once people realise there's a counter system in here and it's pretty consistent [it will become clearer]. We also put in things like keyword counters, so if you have a Fire Shield up, it has the keyword 'fire', if you cast Overwhelming Wave [with a water keyword] at the person with the Fire Shield, it will cancel that fire shield and apply its full effects to the target. So people were kind of going, 'Oh, that makes sense. Like fire, water. Cool, I get it'.

"So, hopefully, it's things that are a little more intuitive, they allow neat tactical variations, that's actually a cool side effect is sometimes you'll think 'Oh, I can cast this spell and it would do that, but if I cast this spell, it'll do its effect *plus* it'll cancel the thing that's on them, so I'm gonna do that instead'. So it adds another little tactical layer to it as well. And it's a little more intuitive, I think."

"WITH A NAUTICAL THEME COMES THE INEVITABLE SHIP-TO-SHIP COMBAT AND PIRATICAL ANTICS HARKING BACK TO ERROL FLYNN"

The return to crowdfunding has seen the Obsidian team once again working away from the watchful gaze of a publisher. While Versus Evil is handling marketing, distribution and suchlike, it is not taking an active role in funding or development decisions, leaving everything 100 per cent up to Obsidian – both to manage the project and deliver on it. But things are different: this is the studio's second attempt at a *Pillars* title, and last time around it went *pretty well*, all things considered. At the same time, it's not the point for the development team to rest on its laurels.

As such, *Deadfire* sees a bold reworking of systems both in front of the player and hidden well behind the scenes, and also a reworking with a leg-up over the last game's development, thanks to the experience earned from the devs. "On the one hand you can say, 'Well, you're redoing everything'," Sawyer explains. "But, we're redoing everything from the perspective of already knowing how it all works, and how it doesn't work. So we still did have a leg-up in terms of approaching it again saying, 'Okay, this is how we authored the effects system the first time, these are the shortcomings, this is how we're doing to author it this time. This is how we structured data within Unity last time, that had some problems, so we're gonna externalise all that stuff so that it's faster and easier for us to modify, and that it's in XML, so that modders can just go crazy'."

And that's an area that saw quick uptake even on an early pre-release version of *Deadfire*: "Actually one of the greatest things about our backer beta is that within like a day of it being out, people were already modding," Sawyer laughs. "[People] were already making new dialogues, or maybe not making new dialogues, but editing dialogues, making new magic items, changing how spells worked, which is great. It was a big complaint people had [with the original *Pillars*] about how obtuse or how difficult it was to mod."

With a release date announced for 3 April and the knowledge – and experience – of the original *Pillars* backing Obsidian up, we're definitely looking forward to *Pillars of Eternity II: Deadfire*. The setting feels – relatively – fresh, the action is refined and strategic, the story already intriguing. The proof will be if the full dozens-of-hours package can keep the momentum and sense of fun going, but the early indications are this could be another fine example in the resurgence of the CRPG.







Above: Time of day changes as you play, and the weather can shift from sunny and bright to torrential downpours in no time at all. It all contributes to a superb atmosphere throughout.
Left: Combat is as tactical as you want it to be; liberal pauses and ability queuing means you can plan ahead as you go… or you can just click 'attack' and hope for the best.
Below: Encounters often play out in these choose-your-own-adventure-style storybook sections. While static and turn-based, they actually manage to be remarkably tense at times.



IN BRIEF

Crowdfunded sequel to the superb *Pillars Of Eternity* CRPG, again bringing together an experienced team and millions of dollars

KICKIN' IT OVER TO FIG

With the original *Pillars Of Eternity* being such a huge success, why would Obsidian want to stick with the crowdfunding route? Well, Sawyer has an answer for that: "We did change from Kickstarter to Fig," he explains. "Part of that is because we felt that there's potentially just more investment funding available through Fig, which turned out to be the case. It was something that we debated about quite a lot internally just because we're like, 'Well, we already have big success on Kickstarter, maybe we should keep using it'. I don't think that it's dramatically changed over time, I think that, ultimately, we're still primarily beholden to the backers, and making a great game for them."

Sawyer points out that while the original was a big success for the studio, it didn't do the kind of numbers the likes of EA would want from its games – so as well as being beholden to backers, Obsidian remains free of publisher interference, too.

THE NEW GOD OF WAR MARKS AN EMOTIONAL TURNING POINT IN THE SERIES

→ CHANGE AFFECTS US ALL, EVEN IF YOU'RE A BADASS DEMIGOD

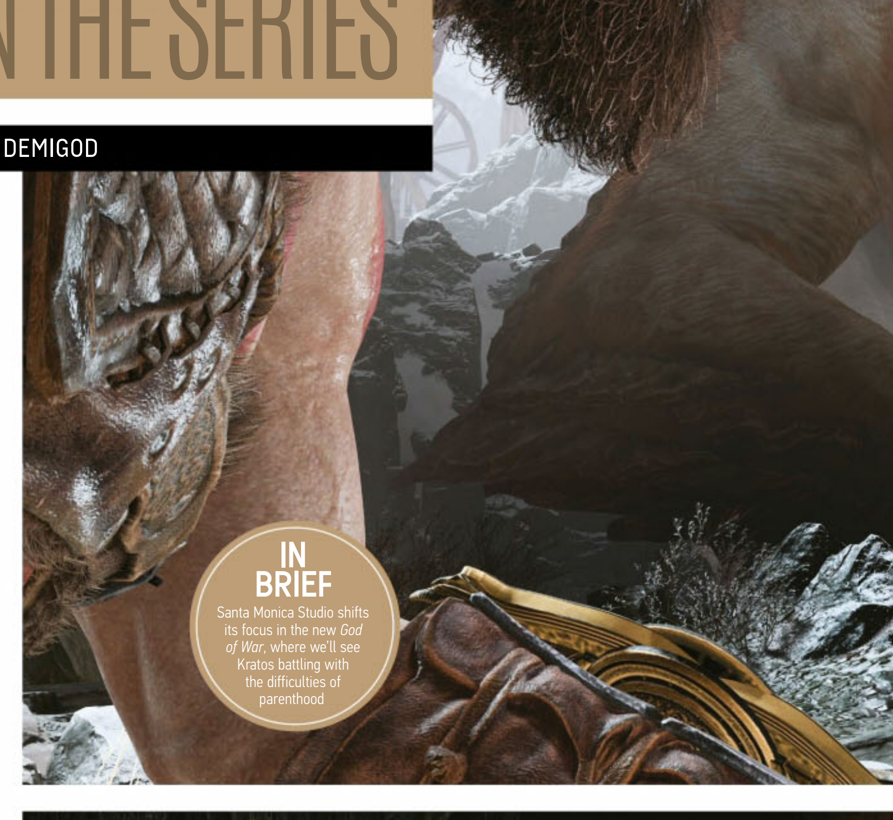
FORMAT: **PS4** | PUBLISHER: **SONY INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT**
DEVELOPER: **SANTA MONICA STUDIO** | RELEASE: **20 APRIL 2018** | PLAYERS: **1**

God Of War is back this year, and it's breaking new ground for Kratos. While retaining the iconic essence of the series, Santa Monica Studio has updated every aspect for the latest instalment. Moving from Greek to Norse mythology, we'll experience brutal battles while hacking and throwing the Leviathan Axe in a freshly redesigned combat system that integrates both Kratos and his son, Atreus. Following Kratos's uncontrollable rage in previous titles, the new *God Of War* reveals his restrained side as he juggles his paternal instincts, keeps his emotions in check and faces a combination of new threats.

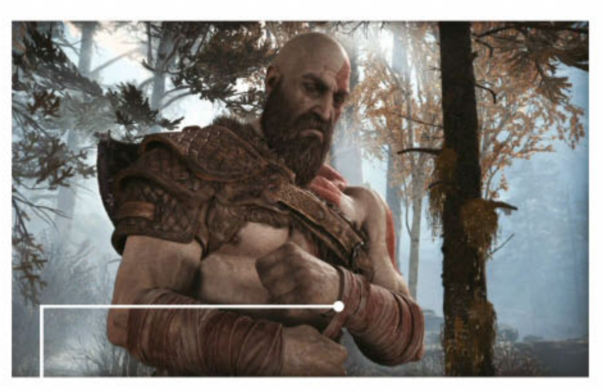
Unaware of his demigod father's past and his own true nature, Atreus will be deeply embedded in the narrative of the new title. As the years have passed, Kratos has matured, marking Santa Monica Studio's choice to develop a deeper, more emotionally charged story for players to unravel. Atreus, however, is far more than just a helpless companion. Proving his value through translating runes and solving puzzles as well as complementing Kratos during combat, we're bound to get as attached to him as his father is.

We're excited to be reunited with Kratos and sink into the new story that Santa Monica Studio has so delicately weaved.



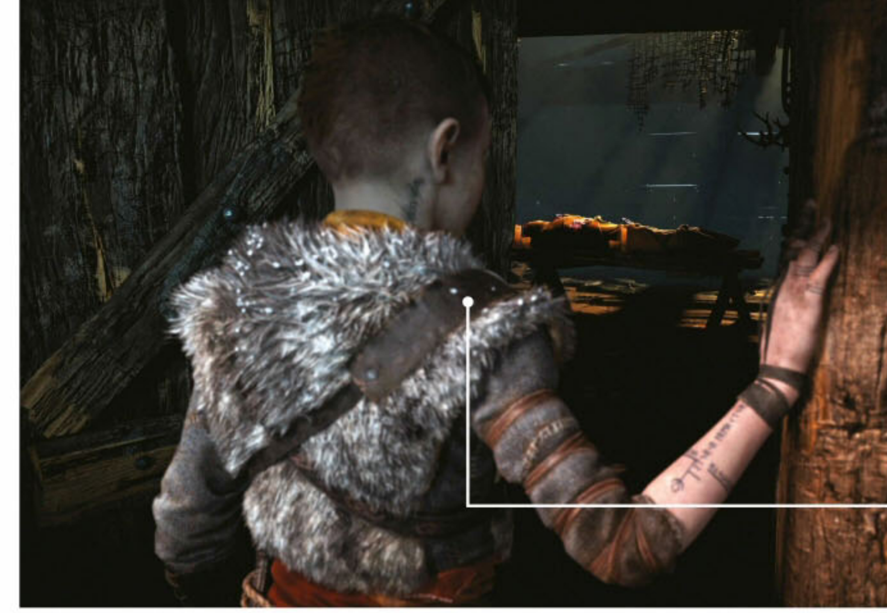


IN BRIEF
Santa Monica Studio shifts its focus in the new *God of War*, where we'll see Kratos battling with the difficulties of parenthood



SCARS FROM THE PAST

The new *God Of War* marks a number of changes, one of the most notable being the absence of the Blades of Chaos. Formerly seared to his flesh, the blades enabled Kratos to annihilate gargantuan enemies in previous instalments of the franchise. Here we see him adjusting his bandages – a reminder of his violent past – while he attempts to control his rage in the new Nordic Realm.



"WHILE RETAINING THE ICONIC ESSENCE OF THE SERIES, SANTA MONICA STUDIO HAS UPDATED EVERY ASPECT IN THE LATEST INSTALMENT"

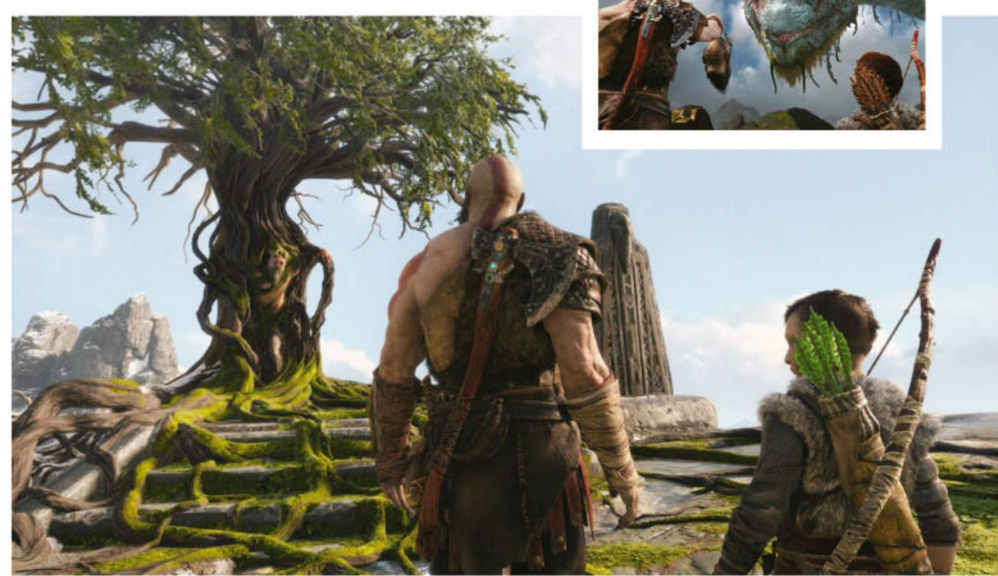
"CAN YOU KILL SOMETHING THAT BIG?"

■ While Atreus's scarred face and bow are telling of his experience in combat alongside his father, he is blissfully unaware of a few glaring details about both Kratos and himself. Atreus will be struggling with his true nature, as he begins to realise that he is more than just a mortal. Kratos has a lot of explaining to do and his son's reaction to the news will undoubtedly impact their relationship.



CHANGE IS DIFFICULT, YET NECESSARY

■ Kratos has emerged from his dark past laden with the new challenge of protecting his son. Consequently, Santa Monica Studio has improved the gameplay and combat to reflect this relationship, providing us with more depth than we've ever experienced in a God Of War game. As always, we can expect epic action, yet this will be anchored to a richer emotional narrative – a development that will span an estimated 25 to 35 hours.



HOW THE VIVE PRO COULD BE A GAME CHANGER FOR VR

→ HTC'S LATEST PREMIUM HEADSET IS LIGHTING THE WAY FOR VIRTUAL REALITY

FORMAT: **VIVE PRO** | PUBLISHER: **HTC** | DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** | RELEASE: **TBC 2018** | PLAYERS: **1**

The few weeks we got to spend with a HTC Vive headset in the office during the summer of 2016 are some of our fondest memories of gaming in recent memory. The fidelity and immersion of the experience was outstanding and really sold us on the power of what VR could do. In the time that has passed VR has become a regular part of our gaming lives, made more affordable and attainable through PSVR, but barriers still remain and HTC is returning to guide us forward.

The most obvious improvement with the Vive Pro is the resolution of the lenses. HTC has achieved a 78 percent improvement in resolution by increasing it to 2880 x 1600 (or 1400 x 1600 per eye) with a density of 615 pixels per inch. First and foremost, that should mean a significant improvement in clarity when viewing through the headset, reducing the severity of visible pixels. In turn, that should mean that games generally look crisper and smoother than they do on any other VR headset. What it also means is that text should be far more legible through the VR headset, which opens up a lot of possibilities for VR experiences, particularly in industrial fields where that has been much harder.

Right off the bat, the pro portion of this new headset's name should be becoming rather apparent to you. While HTC has yet to name its price for the new VR kit (at the time of going to press) we would imagine that it will be much more than the original Vive headset launched for. But, while this headset is no more accessible to us gamers, it does light the way for where VR should and can head in the next few years with some other smart design and functionality choices.

The most important of these is actually an optional extra and that's the wireless adapter HTC will be releasing, which will be compatible with both the original Vive and its revamped successor. Wireless VR is everyone's number-one request when it comes to improvements to the virtual reality and HTC is bringing it to market itself. But removing wires doesn't simply reduce the number of tripping risks you have to face; it also opens up the possibilities for what VR can realistically do. It gives you freedom of movement, of course, which means developers can create much more kinetic and mobile experiences for HTC Vive now than they might have thought possible before. It also makes the headset a logical and more comfortable choice for anyone wanting to create social VR setups, like full room or full building local multiplayer experiences that embellish real-world topography with VR overlays for a more immersive piece of entertainment.

IN BRIEF

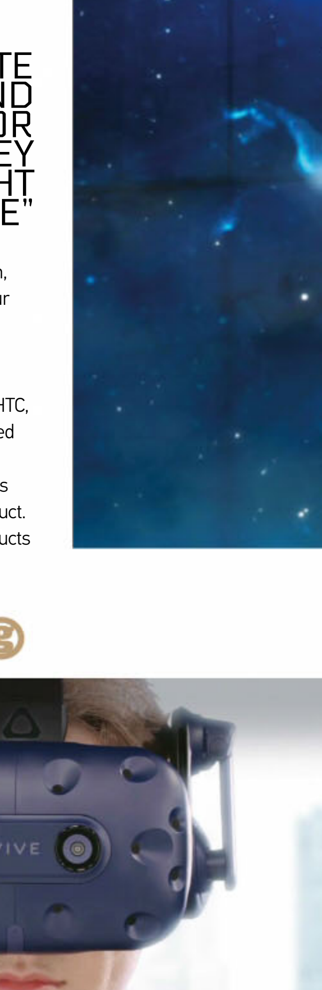
HTC follows up its industry-leading VR headset with a newer and more powerful model for pro users

Aiding this sort of approach are the dual front-facing cameras on the headset, which are open to developers to use as they see fit. Most obviously, they can be used for augmented reality, allowing you to see what is really right in front of you while placing a virtual experience on top. The cameras can also be utilised for better obstacle tracking so that you can remain more aware of your surroundings as you play. Dual mics have also been included in the headset, which will aid stereo voice capture and communication (good for those multiplayer games for providing directional voice support), while in-built headphones removes even more wires from the equation, aiding mobility again and increasing overall comfort.

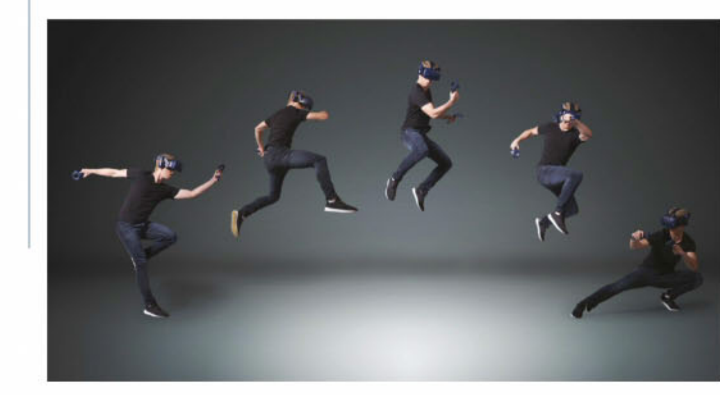
This really seems to be the key here as other design changes, such as an adjustable headband size wheel, should help make the Vive Pro a more balanced and user-friendly device than its forebear. It's not quite the PSVR halo design, but it's something between the two and that might be just fine. Increased comfort and improved visuals, as well as mobility, should combine well to encourage developers to experiment with more longer-form VR titles. While *Fallout 4* and *Doom* have been released for VR to some early acclaim, most publishers have yet to back multi-hour projects for VR, but if more virtual reality solutions were like this one, that could well change quickly.

> "DEVELOPERS CAN CREATE MUCH MORE KINETIC AND MOBILE EXPERIENCES FOR HTC VIVE NOW THAN THEY MIGHT HAVE THOUGHT POSSIBLE BEFORE"

One company not in a rush though is HTC, having made it clear that this device is aimed at higher-end users and professionals and acknowledging widely that virtual reality has yet to break through as a mainstream product. It's getting its concepts in early and its products out the door now to set the agenda, and so long as everyone else is taking notice we should be the beneficiaries of that forward vision in the years to come.







WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE VIVE PRO

ARMS

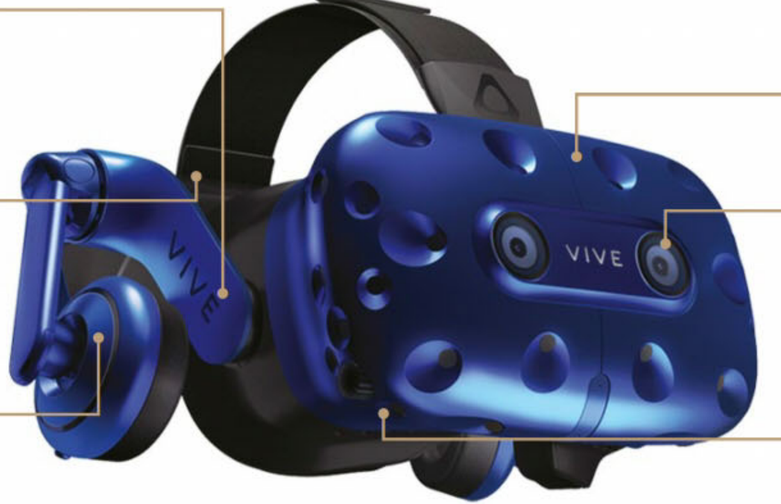
■ The new design is intended to evenly distribute the weight of the headset across your head, similar to the PSVR halo design.

WIRELESS ADAPTER

■ This adapter, sold separately, is compatible with both Vive headsets and powered by Intel WiGig technology for an optimal streaming experience at 60Ghz.

HEADPHONES

■ In-built headphones offer a 3D spatial audio experience. Combined with dual microphones, they offer active noise cancelling as well as an Alert Mode and Conversation Mode for more social play.



HEADSET

■ 2880 x 1600 resolution (615ppi).

CAMERAS

■ Vive's Chaperone feature creates a virtual outline of your environment to make avoiding objects much easier.

CUSHION

■ Redesigned cushioning around the nose and cheeks means that the Vive Pro blocks even more light from getting into the headset for a more immersive experience.

HOW SKY BUILDS ON THE SUCCESS OF JOURNEY

→ THE SPIRITUAL SUCCESSOR FROM THATGAMECOMPANY LOOKS LIKE EVERYTHING WE COULD HAVE HOPED FOR

FORMAT: **IOS** | PUBLISHER: **IN-HOUSE** | DEVELOPER: **THATGAMECOMPANY** | PLAYERS: **1-8** | RELEASE: **TBC 2018**

What made *Journey* such a heart-warming and uplifting experience? Was it the open world and moments of discovery? The segments of breathless movement? The terrifying moments when the challenge seemed insurmountable? Or perhaps the moment once it was all done and you realised that all those hooded figures like yourself that you met along the way were really other players? Possibly it was less so that last element, although the realisation was a potent one and it's that reveal thatgamecompany is doubling down on with *Sky*.

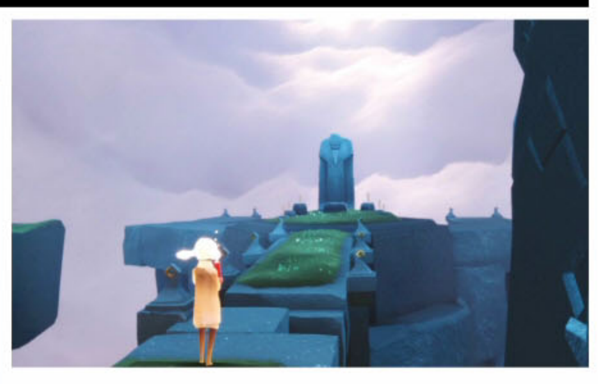
Having played through the game in an early test build this feels every bit like a successor to *Journey*. It has the same kind of wordless storytelling and the same sense of an ancient and rich world history that you can piece together from context. More importantly, it's a shared world with up to eight players in one location at a time and the ability to interact with others in a far more detailed way than before. As you gather energy from candles and shrines, you unlock emotes and ways of interacting with other players. This results in the ability to aid one another by holding hands and taking flight.

The default atmosphere of camaraderie and cooperation is a potent one that gives *Sky* an instantly inviting feel, while the relative lack of instruction keeps that all-important air of mystery alive and teases you with the potential for new revelation around every corner.

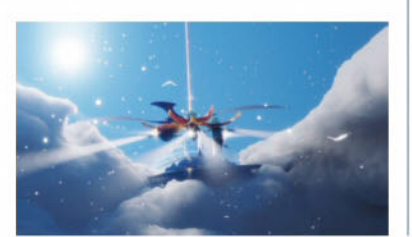
The controls on iPhone and iPad are relatively simplistic, but nicely implemented. Swiping up makes your character skip forward in beats. You can use some subtler control with lighter strokes on the screen and move the camera around with two fingers. Meanwhile tapping on the corners of the screen brings up different menu options (such as a screenshot mode, which gives you more polished captures) and tapping on your character produces a friendly chirping pulse similar to that seen in thatgamecompany's last release.

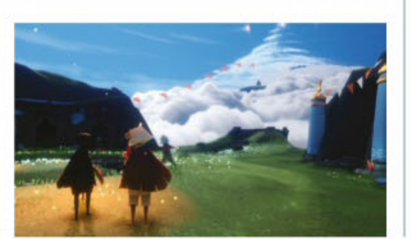
We're still expecting that *Sky* will see a wider release on other platforms in the near future, but right now it's looking very strong on iOS devices and no less captivating on a smaller screen in our hand than it might be in our living rooms.

IN BRIEF
Bringing single-player adventure merged with shared world interaction to mobile, thatgamecompany strikes again



Above: The more you interact with shrines and other players the more your character will develop and become more unique. Engaging with the world is how you level up and evolve in the game.





Left: The journey from the start of the game up through the sky to a mountain-like formation of clouds seems very reminiscent of *Journey*. How closely tied the two worlds are intended to be we're still not sure.

10 THINGS TO KNOW BEFORE YOU PLAY SEA OF THIEVES



→ WE'VE SPENT HOURS ON THE HIGH SEAS AND NOW WE HAVE SOME TIPS FOR YOU

FORMAT: **XBOX ONE, PC** | PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT** | DEVELOPER: **RARE** | RELEASE: **20 MARCH 2018** | PLAYERS: **MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER**



IT'S GOOD TO TAKE A BREAK

1 A pirate's life can be all sailing, rope-pulling, swashbuckling and cannon-firing, but it's also good to take a moment and appreciate the finer things. Rare has done a wonderful job of creating this game world and just taking a moment to watch a sunrise can really be something to behold.

SOLO PLAY IS ENLIGHTENING

2 Rare suggests that playing solo should be for experienced players only, but we would add that it's a good place to have the fundamentals hammered home. When sailing solo you really come to appreciate how your vessel needs to be managed and how a full crew can add to the experience.

GROUP PLAY IS JUST MORE FUN

3 Getting a crew together remains the best way to play. Solo treasure hunting has its rewards, but the joy of working together and the hilarity that is inherently going to ensue as a result just makes it more interesting. And you can cover each other's backs when things get confrontational.

MISSIONS ARE SHORT AND SHARP

4 We've had a chance to get a feel for how the mission-giving companies work in *Sea Of Thieves* and for the most part their quests seem to keep things local and quick. Higher-level quests start to become a little more complex, but for the most part things are nicely contained.

BUT SOME MISSIONS KEEP GOING…

5 You'll need to keep an eye on some missions as new treasure maps will unlock as you find each chest. This leads to multi-location treasure hunts that can span two or three different islands and make for a much more involved hunt. They can be cancelled at any time though if they drag.

IN BRIEF
Join a shared-world pirate experience filled with adventure, peril and no small amount of good humour and silliness







SHARKS ARE SCARIER THAN SKELETONS

6 You wouldn't have thought that such a cartoon world would offer much by way of real terrors, but the sharks in the ocean give us the creeps. They are a pretty incredible threat, but one we hope to have the tools to combat by the time of the full release. By comparison the skeleton crews seem quaint.

BIG REWARDS FOR BIG RISK

7 And where are you likely to meet a shark? Well, most likely around a shipwreck, which is why they're such good risk/reward locations. You can sometimes find chests in wrecks way above the level of rewards you're getting missions to locate. But they are treacherous locations to explore.

MAKING RANDOM FRIENDS IS HARD

8 How can you tell if another crew is friendly or not? We're still not sure. We attempted to show our desire for peaceful seafaring with a choreographed sea shanty routine as we leapt around playing instruments, but more often than not we were fired upon. Perhaps better techniques will emerge.

THE EDGE OF THE WORLD IS DEATH

9 We had to see what was beyond the edges of the map. Is Rare secretly a group of flat Earthers? Possibly, but what we found was actually more unnerving and bizarre. If you have nothing valuable on board and you're curious to see what's out beyond the parchment's edge, it's worth a look.

GOOD TIME TO GAME PASS

10 Microsoft has announced that all of its first-party exclusives will be launching on Game Pass the same day as their street release. That means with the Game Pass Subscription you can play *Sea Of Thieves* from day one without buying the full game. A big step towards a Netflix model.

THE OCCUPATION BRINGS JOURNALISM TO THE STEALTH THRILLER

→ WHITE PAPER GAMES CO-FOUNDER PETE BOTTOMLEY TALKS US THROUGH HIS TEAM'S FOLLOW UP TO ETHER ONE

FORMAT: **PC** | PUBLISHER: **HUMBLE BUNDLE** | DEVELOPER: **WHITE PAPER GAMES** | RELEASE: **TBC 2018** | PLAYERS: **1**

The themes and topics of *The Occupation* feel intensely relevant to the current political climate. Issues of immigration policy, government powers, the integrity of the press and more are tackled head on by White Paper Games' latest. Thankfully, this is all in a fictional universe, so you don't need to be too caught up on current affairs.

It's 1987 in a fictionalised version of north west England and after an attack kills 23 people the government is about to vote on The Union Act. As a journalist you have a chance to sway the public debate, but you only have four real-time hours before the vote. And anything you do could impact the decision. We caught up with White Paper Games co-founder Pete Bottomley to learn more about this ambitious stealth thriller.

IN BRIEF

It's a time of political upheaval with a major vote happening in four hours. Can you affect the outcome by uncovering new information?

Can you tell us which came first, the world setting or the themes that you wanted to explore in *The Occupation*?

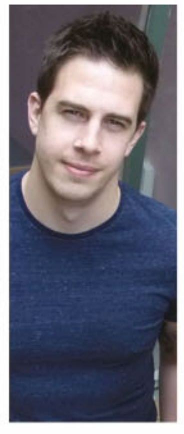
It's definitely a mixture of both. When we're starting a new game as a team, we think about the themes we'd like to tackle along with the world we'd like to create. I think the theme definitely has more control of what direction we take the game in, so if we're thinking of ideas about the world and the theme takes us in a different direction, we tend to follow that. Creating a sense of world is important to us. We create our games within the same universe so that they can exist side by side. I think it helps players to lose themselves and become more immersed in the experience when it's something they can relate to.

There are lots of hot-button subjects here with immigration, surveillance and journalism. How much of this was intentionally looking to comment or play off current affairs?

It was an intentional decision, but that being said, you never know what the climate will be like three years from now. We always want to create games that are meaningful to us. We based our previous game, *Ether One*, around dementia and showed how the disease can affect minds and lives as well as the impact it has on the people around us. We realised everyone on the team had gone through something like this in their personal lives, so it became something close to us that we wanted to explore with a game. Similarly, with *The Occupation,* we found ourselves discussing all of the subjects you mentioned above in the studio, so we decided to base a game around them. Since we're having this discussion three years on and the topics are even more relevant now suggests that they're intensifying and with games like this, hopefully, we can help continue that conversation.

How did you come to settle on the four-hour time period for the game?

There's something interesting to us about a fixed time frame in which to do things, and the idea that you have to commit to each decision you make and have the world then react to it. Knowing you have a meeting in ten minutes limits what gameplay options you're able to explore and allows you to create a plan in your head. Much like the approach to stealth games where the aim is to create a plan and then execute upon it. Knowing you have one chance for a specific event to happen and each minute counts adds an interesting tension that can be hard to recreate by removing part of a health bar or have a certain amount of ammo left in the weapon you're carrying. There's also a technical constraint attached to that number. We knew we wanted to add a lot of rich detail and the idea being that if you follow a single character, there's enough of an arc there for it to be interesting. That gets multiplied by the number of characters you add so we wanted to make sure that we gave the game enough time to make the experience rich and deep without it feeling like there wasn't the possibility of space for the player to create their own paths through the world.



PETE BOTTOMLEY
White Paper Games

With the fixed game time and open design, we're guessing there's a lot of content people are likely to miss on the first playthrough. Has that factored in your design plans?

Yes definitely. We love games such as *Thief And Dishonored* where there's a real sense of world and there may be lots of additional content you miss and narrative threads you never pick up on until a second or third playthrough. The intention wasn't to create a game that you would have to play multiple times, I'm the type of player who will play a game through once and be satisfied that that was my story in that world. But for people that like to pull apart every bit of the world fiction, we layer in lots of different arcs so that there are multiple stories to follow through to the game's ending. The interest comes when the player hears about a certain event and things are framed in one way, but someone else may have picked up on some completely different information that sways what each person thinks about the character. Much like in life, you're swayed by the information you have access to and you don't know what you don't know.

We get the impression from your early reveals that there may not exactly be a fail state before the clock times out on the game…

Exactly. The game continues to play without there being a specific fail state. If the player wanted to go and sit outside and feed the pigeons for X amount of time, the world would

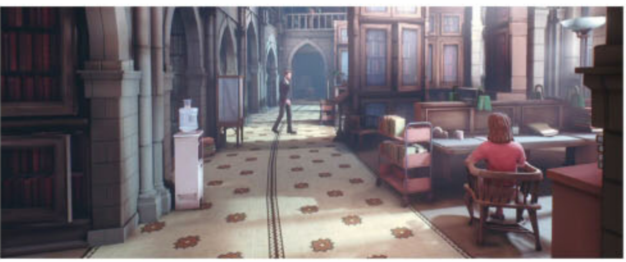
Below: If you wanted to, you could spend the entire game exploring the grounds and not engaging with the primary concern of the narrative, but once your time is up the game will end regardless.



continue to move and react to events happening around them. Instead of us having a 'mission failure' screen, if the player is caught somewhere they shouldn't be, the security guards will take you to their office, give you a little telling off, which comes at the sacrifice of the player's time. They will then send you on your way, with the hopes of you not wanting to cross their path again. This makes time the biggest fail state since, when you're out of it, the game will determine the outcome of your decisions.

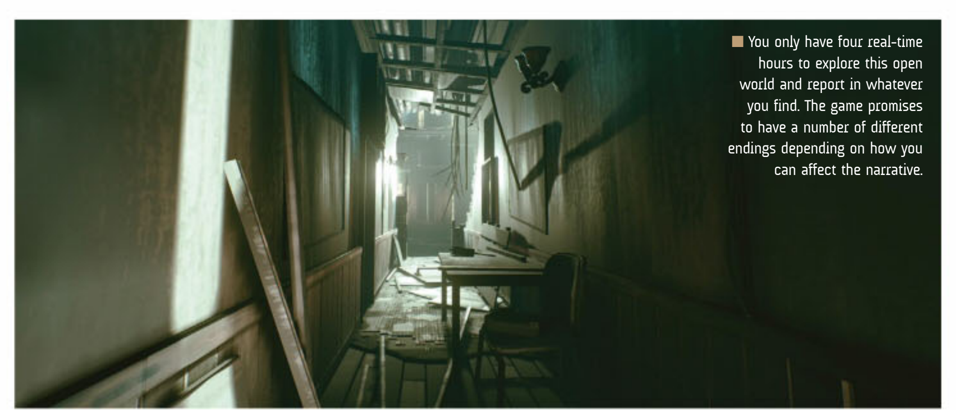
How reactive is the AI to your behaviour and the changes made to their routine?

Since we're a small team, tackling AI was a massive challenge for us to undertake both in design and technical implementation. The first big challenge was to get the AI's locomotion to a level where you can see each character reach out and touch a door handle whilst opening a door that isn't double hinged. This creates a much larger technical challenge than you would imagine. We wanted to create a small cast of characters and double down on their personalities and traits to make them as reactive as we could. This means that each AI in the world has a set of tasks or a routine to complete, much like anyone would when going to work for the day. But there are habits that can break routine, such as drinking too much coffee, which causes them to need the bathroom. This means that although you may be aware of what the AI should be doing on their 'linear' path, they can break away from that to have conversations, use the bathroom, take a smoke break or whatever their desires are telling them to do, which means each game is very different and relies instead on the systems we simulate to create emergence in the gameplay.



"MUCH LIKE IN LIFE, YOU'RE SWAYED BY THE INFORMATION YOU HAVE ACCESS TO AND YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW"

PETE BOTTOMLEY, WHITE PAPER GAMES



You only have four real-time hours to explore this open world and report in whatever you find. The game promises to have a number of different endings depending on how you can affect the narrative.

BELIEVE YOUR EARS

From what we've seen of *The Occupation* we're deeply impressed by the audio design of the game, so we asked the game's audio designer, Nathaniel Jordon-Apostol, about his approach to music and sound effects. "The sound of *The Occupation* is very important to the game's experience. I want the focus to be on diegetic sound so that almost everything you hear as you play is real, and could be right around the corner," he explains. "If a coffee machine is heard down a corridor, then someone is there using it. You will need to pay attention to the world if you want to be aware of the surrounding characters." And the attention to detail goes further still with the in-game radio music being made by the team. "We've designed our own radio stations and written four hours of unique Eighties music so that the world feels like you're exploring a real place. You can even set your watch to tune in to a certain radio station at a certain time to hear your favourite hit. This means that the majority of the music is playing in the game in real time."

TOTAL WAR HEADS TO CHINA WITH THREE KINGDOMS

→ CREATIVE ASSEMBLY REVEALS ITS STUNNING RETURN TO HISTORICAL CONFLICTS

FORMAT: **PC** | PUBLISHER: **SEGA** | DEVELOPER: **CREATIVE ASSEMBLY** | RELEASE: **AUTUMN 2018** | PLAYERS: **TBC**

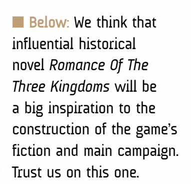
It feels as if this has been a long time coming. Creative Assembly is finally taking a step back from the world of *Warhammer* and is returning to what it does best, a Total War rooted in real-world history. It's the first in five years and that alone ensures that expectation is already running high, although that's not all that surprising given that *Total War: Three Kingdoms* is taking us into a time period that we've never seen the famed strategy series tackle in the past.

Three Kingdoms brings Total War to China and into one of the most turbulent times in the nation's history. The Han Dynasty is crumbling and the stage is all set for a new epoch, but which of the powerful warring warlords will be able to take control and ultimately seize the throne? That, of course, will largely depend on how competent you are with large-scale unit manipulation, tactical thought processes and hero unit management.

Creative Assembly has spent the better part of a year bolstering the operational size of its core strategy team to begin pushing towards the 'autumn 2018' release window it has set for *Three Kingdoms*. The studio has been putting considerable time over the last few months into researching historical city layouts for the game, not to mention a larger focus than ever before on motion-capture recording (the results of which can be glimpsed in the stunning reveal trailer). Total War is, after all, the flagship series for the company; it wants to – quite unsurprisingly – go all out for its return to historical-era fantasy.



Above: Total War: *Three Kingdoms* is the first full title to return to history as a backdrop to the series' action after a few years of smaller spin-offs and the high-fantasy *Warhammer* entries.



Below: We think that influential historical novel *Romance Of The Three Kingdoms* will be a big inspiration to the construction of the game's fiction and main campaign. Trust us on this one.



That isn't to say that Total War: Warhammer has been a waste of time. Far from it – in fact, we expect to see many of the mechanics and systems developed for the niche high-fantasy strategy titles over the last three years to make an appearance here.

If any of you are familiar with Luo Guanzhong's influential historical novel *Romance Of The Three Kingdoms* you'll probably already have a good sense of what this game will be dealing with and how it will make use of many of Total War: Warhammer's best mechanics. The book posited the fall of the Han Dynasty as an era defined by legendary, almost larger-than-life, heroes; presenting large-scale tactical military battles as factions scrap for territory, and the struggles of these warring states to hold some sort of dominance over the country across 100 years.

It sounds like the perfect backdrop for a Total War game, particularly when you consider Creative Assembly's penchant for delivering historical-era titles that deal in part historical, part legend, and part mythical truths. The trailer and early chatter from studio personnel goes some way to confirm this. We wouldn't be surprised to learn that the three heroes in the trailer are none other than Cao Cao, Liu Bei and Sun Ce – the three heads of the three dynasties – characters that sure would make good use out of the Legendary Lord mechanic introduced in *Total War: Warhammer*. Still, conjecture aside, *Three Kingdoms* is going to be one of the biggest PC titles of the year and you better believe that we will be following this one closely.







IN BRIEF

Total War heads to 190CE as it looks to deliver its unique blend of real-time tactics and turn-based strategy across ancient China





DETECTIVE PIKACHU IS COMING TO A 3DS NEAR YOU VERY SOON

→ EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE MOST RIDICULOUS POKÉMON GAME EVER MADE

Is there a reason Pikachu is wearing a miniature deerstalker?

Aside from it being, like, the cutest thing to ever feature in a video game, Pikachu has donned the attire of famed investigator Sherlock Holmes for this wild Pokémon spin-off. It sees the series mascot teaming up with a human, Tim Goodman, to solve a variety of mysteries, cause trouble for the local police and lend further credence to the need for all wild Pokémon to be stuffed inside of Poké Balls.

Wait, how can a Pokémon solve mysteries?

Seriously, that's your sticking point? Okay, fine; you see, this is no ordinary Pikachu. Wicked dress sense aside, it also carries a variety of human characteristics – including the ability to speak English in a gripping baritone voice, the capacity to back talk human handlers, and it also possesses a strong love of black coffee – which helps in its desire to solve crimes, we suppose.

Is this the game the internet wanted Danny DeVito to star in?

It is indeed, but that isn't happening. In fact, when quizzed by an audience member during a panel at the LA Paley Center For Media, the *It's Always Sunny In Philadelphia* star quickly shot down fans in attendance by biting back: "I don't know what you're talking about… what the fuck is Pokémon?"

This is a joke. This *is* a joke, isn't it?

Nope! In fact, when Detective Pikachu launched in Japan back in 2016 it was such a huge success that it prompted Legendary Entertainment to acquire the rights to the property.

Why would they do that… that isn't happening, right?

The live-action film is scheduled for 2019, with *Goosebumps* director Rob Letterman set to lead production and Ryan Reynolds to star as Detective Pikachu. Truly, these are strange days.

Okay, so, I clearly need to check this out. When is it coming to the west?

Detective Pikachu: Birth Of A New Duo will bring its bizarre blend of Pokémon action and Layton-esque puzzle solving to Nintendo 3DS on 23 March 2018.

IN BRIEF

Theme Hospital, but for a whole new generation of patients and a whole new look

PREFERENTIAL TREATMENT



Want early access to information and trailers, sometimes even before we get to see 'em? While the game's only recently been announced - and there's not much in the way of official assets such as screenshots and teaser videos just yet - you can nevertheless sign up now for Two Point's Hospital Pass, a mailing list that asks for your Steam ID in exchange for monthly "health check" emails, access to behind-the-scenes videos and free in-game items when the title finally launches later this year. You'll even get access to "a secret section of the website" and permission to view locked media. To unlock the goodies, just sign up via Steam (although we should point out that to do so, you'll need to give Sega permission to "redeem and activate CD-Keys" on your Steam account, so check before you click!).





TWO POINT HOSPITAL TAKES US BACK IN TIME

→ INDUSTRY VETS RESUSCITATE A CLASSIC GENRE WITH ALL THE CLASSIC HUMOUR YOU WOULD EXPECT

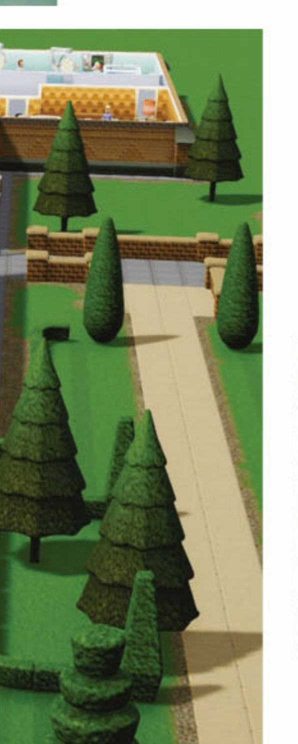
FORMAT: **PC** | PUBLISHER: **SEGA** | DEVELOPER: **TWO POINT STUDIOS** | RELEASE: **TBC 2018** | PLAYERS: **1-TBC**



Ah, 1997, it was a golden year. The Verve were stomping the streets shouting about *Bitter Sweet Symphony*, Oasis asked us if we knew what they meant and the Backstreet Boys insisted that backstreet was back, alright? Yes, our clothes were terrible, and no, we didn't really know what to do with our hair, but those were halcyon days, my friend - and that's before we remind you that 1997 also gave us *Goldeneye 007*, *Final Fantasy VII*, *Fallout*, and *Grand Theft Auto*, all in a single 12-month period. Yes, really.

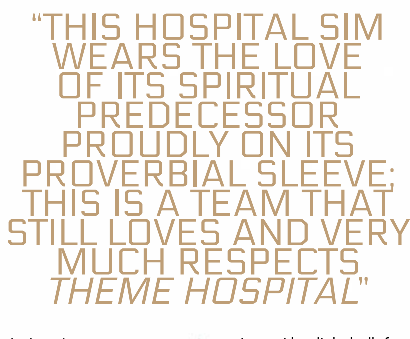
1997 was also the year *Theme Hospital* opened its doors to new patients. The second game from the team behind the sensational *Theme Park* - a deliciously dark sim that had us all agonising over the optimal placement of our ice-cream stands and queue lines - this business-management sim adopted many of the mechanics of *Theme Park*, but placed it in a building where the lives of its people were in our hands… literally. It spawned a raft of copycat hospital-centric sims, and - even though it'll shortly celebrate its 21st anniversary (yikes) - it's still available to buy today, and it still looks great.

Above: Invest carefully to maximise profits and provide emergency medical care for a range of bizarre illnesses. What the machine in the top left does, we have no idea. It probably hurts, though. Below: See? Told you there were Egyptian mummies. We've also spied a selection of Sega arcade machines sitting in the lobby, too…



One such hopeful spiritual successor is *Two Point Hospital*. The co-founders – who were on *Theme Hospital*'s original programming team back in the day – have been working on *TPH* for a couple of years now, but admit to "thinking about it for 20". That's the special thing here; unlike others of its ilk, this hospital sim wears its love of *Theme Hospital* proudly on its proverbial sleeve. And now, as it gears up for release on Steam later this year (sorry, no other platforms have been announced as yet), it very much hopes to continue in *TH*'s tradition of taking the humdrum monotony of everyday working life, and injecting it with a healthy dose of good humour. Oh, and cynicism; lots and lots of cynicism.

You already know how it works; you build and customise your hospital, using your own discretion to ascertain what specialities your service might offer, carefully selecting the gadgets you'll need to invest in to cure your patients. But this is no free-at-the-point-of-delivery NHS hospital, I'm afraid; a purely for-profit endeavour, your job is to squeeze every last penny from the poor souls who need medical attention - as well as those who work for you, of course (insert your own Jeremy Hunt jokes right here).



"THIS HOSPITAL SIM WEARS THE LOVE OF ITS SPIRITUAL PREDECESSOR PROUDLY ON ITS PROVERBIAL SLEEVE; THIS IS A TEAM THAT STILL LOVES AND VERY MUCH RESPECTS *THEME HOSPITAL*"

Two Point's mantra - "Care for, and profit from, the ill" - is… well, comically awful, let's face it. Because it's not just about charging for cures and treatment; you can - nay, should - also sponge off the kind souls coming to visit their sick friends and relatives by, say, ramping up the costs of refreshments. The more you earn, the more additional hospitals you can open, and the bigger your emergency empire will reign across Two Point County. That's right; you'll be profiting off of other people's misfortune! What a time to be alive.

You'll get to push around the staff, too, of course. Want to be an ethical employer who seeks to get the best out of their team? Go for it. Want to be a tyrannical asshat that refuses to cater to demands and unceremoniously fires anyone who fails to make the grade? You can go for that, too (we know which one we'd prefer to do…).

While co-op plans haven't yet been disclosed, you are able to collaborate - and/or compete - with your pals by contributing your medical marvels to "Two Point County's global medical community", and participating in competitive multiplayer challenges.

The magic with *Two Point* is that it doesn't take itself too seriously. The game offers a range of tongue-in-cheek ailments for you to cure, from light-headedness (portrayed as a patient with a light bulb for a head), to… well, we don't know what these indicate, but we've seen clowns, mummies (the Egyptian kind) and a handful of ghosts – although we're unsure if the latter is an ailment, or simply a sign that efforts to save someone came a tad late. The handful of screenshots we've seen to date are wonderfully reminiscent of *Theme Hospital*, all characters – and their accompanying ailments – stuffed with colour, personality and humour.

Yes, we understand your trepidation; games that creators self-certify as "funny" often warrant caution, as we've had to learn the hard way. But *Two Point Hospital* shares so much of the heart and fun of *Theme Hospital*, and it even boasts some of *TH*'s original programming team. It might just be what the doctor ordered.



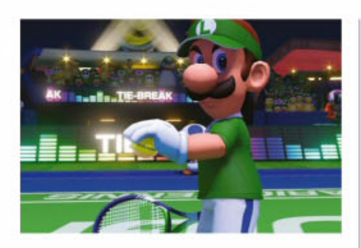


IN BRIEF
The Mushroom Kingdom crew are heading back to the courts for a few rounds, this time with vastly expanded functionality

WHY MARIO TENNIS ACES NEEDS TO RETURN TO ITS ROOTS

→ RACKETS IN HAND, MARIO AND CREW ARE BACK IN ACTION AND HOPEFULLY FOCUSING ON THE BASICS

FORMAT: **SWITCH** | PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO** | DEVELOPER: **CAMELOT** | RELEASE: **Q1 2018** | PLAYERS: **1-4**



KEEP THE MADNESS, LOSE THE INSANITY

1 What has kept the Mario Tennis games feeling fun and accessible over the years has been their willingness to play around a little with mechanics and power shots, embellishing the sport of tennis. Where that's fallen foul though is when power-ups take over and skill begins to be subsumed by fortune on the court. So far, *Aces* looks to be leaning more towards a skill-based game with power-up flair from time to time.



ATTENTION TO DETAIL

2 We're loving some of the finer details we can already see in *Mario Tennis Aces*. For a start, those outfits are actually tennis-appropriate for a change, rather than having the Mushroom Kingdom crew rocking up in their civilian garb. The ATP will be pleased to see that. There's also a lot going on beyond the court with more detailed crowds, who actually wear the colours and logos of their favourite players (they wave flags too), light-up signage that reacts to the action, and a lot more.



DRIVE THE ACTION

3 Story mode is returning to Mario Tennis and while that may not seem like the most important thing in the world, we're pretty excited about it. For a start, it means that we'll have a little more than just the basic tennis experience to enjoy, with other racket and ball-based challenges to face, as well as boss battles that will offer a different style of play. At present it looks like you'll be able to play as the main cast of stars for this mode, but we'll be interested to see if a created player is also an option.



POWER CONTROL

4 We were interested to note that there's a power meter of some kind in the top-left corner of the screen as you play *Mario Tennis Aces*. We're hoping that rather than just being an indicator of when you can pull off a power shot, it also combines with the chance shots to be a kind of in-game control for how often you can pull off a near-always game-winning smash against your opponent. As we said, give us the madness, but keep it under some kind of control so that skill prevails.



RISU'S RECREATIONAL RECESS!

Spot the difference: Can you find the nine changes?





Wordsearch

M	G	I	K	O	D	I	K	O	D	A	L
R	E	G	G	H	O	S	T	E	O	S	C
H	V	U	P	P	N	H	M	S	O	W	U
A	O	G	H	A	N	O	R	U	K	E	T
P	L	O	E	R	N	O	I	C	A	E	E
P	P	G	R	A	B	T	B	K	N	P	U
I	R	G	O	D	U	U	S	S	A	E	P
N	A	L	M	I	R	I	S	U	N	R	H
E	N	E	O	S	I	S	E	T	O	D	O
S	K	S	N	E	H	A	P	P	Y	L	R
S	S	I	E	E	C	S	T	A	C	Y	I
K	I	S	S	F	A	N	G	E	L	E	A

Checklist

ANGEL	LOVE
BUSTY	MR HAPPINESS
CHIRU	NANAKO
CUTE	PANTSU
DEMON	PARADISE
DOKI DOKI	PHEROMONES
DOTES	PRANKS
ECSTACY	RISU
EUPHORIA	RUB
GHOST	SHOOT
GOGGLES	SUCK
HAPPY	SWEEPER
KISS	WOO
KURONA	

Secret phrase (revealed when the wordsearch is complete):

_ _ _   _ _ _   _ _   _ _ _ _

COMING SOON TO PS4 & SWITCH!



WHY I ♥...

PLAYER UNKNOWN'S BATTLEGROUNDS

SEAN VANAMAN, CAMPO SANTO

I spent a lot of late summer/early fall playing PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds. *But why do I love it? It's probably because I started playing it with a really great group of people that Olly Moss introduced me to – we always like to game together, but it's hard because we live so far apart. All the people have varying skill levels, but none of us are hyper competitive, so that game, to me, meant that every night I got to go on a long simulated road trip with three friends – where we all hop into a car and drive around this fucking crazy murder island.*

Maybe we are the best murderers; often times we are not… okay, most times we are not – it often ends in failure. And there is nothing about that, in terms of the history of game design (or what traditional game designers will tell you), which should be fun. But holy crap, it is fun! It's just a bad road trip simulator for me and I love it.

I have no interest in playing it competitively and I have no interest in the competitive scene; all I'm interested in is getting The Murder Boys together, jumping in a car and getting into some trouble… and maybe we'll even see if we can win this thing. It's the greatest time, it's just so much fun.

"All I'm interested in is getting The Murder Boys together, jumping in a car and getting into some trouble"
SEAN VANAMAN, CAMPO SANTO



TIME TO SWITCH



IT'S DIFFICULT TO REMEMBER A TIME WHEN NINTENDO FOUND ITSELF IN A POSITION AS ENVIABLE AS THIS. Publicly and privately, developers and publishers are quick to paint a picture of Nintendo reborn; the company thriving as it continues to defy all expectations and predications in the marketplace. "I think even the most diehard Nintendo fans have been surprised by the numbers achieved during these first 12 months," admits Adolfo Aguirre of Lienzo, the studio behind upcoming action-adventure game *Mulaka*. And truth be told, it's a sentiment we've found to be echoed almost universally throughout the development community.

There's something you have to understand; to say that the Nintendo Switch has had a successful first year would be something of an understatement. The Switch has eclipsed the lifetime sales of the Wii U in just ten months, securing more than 14.86 million unit sales some four years and two months faster than its much-maligned predecessor. This is a system that has quickly captured the attention of the industry and the imagination of the community, its smart hybrid design, innovative multiplayer functionality and surprising portability all contributing factors to its immense success. We've seen an *incredible* array of Switch exclusives launch in the year – one of the strongest in Nintendo history – which has certainly helped establish the console as a must-own, though it's undoubtedly the steady stream of big third-party games and innovative indie releases that has helped ensure that the Switch is glued to the hands of its owner no matter the time or place.

THE NINTENDO SWITCH HAS DEFIED ALL EXPECTATION IN THE LAST 12 MONTHS. TO CELEBRATE ITS ONE-YEAR ANNIVERSARY, WE SPEAK WITH DEVELOPERS TO GET A SENSE OF ITS SUCCESS, DEEP DIVE INTO NINTENDO'S NEW AVENUES OF INNOVATION AND TAKE A CLOSER LOOK AT ITS 28 HOTTEST GAMES FOR 2018



That isn't hyperbole either, we'd wager that just about everybody that owns a Switch will have a story of their own to share – of enjoying triple-A quality gaming on the go. Don't believe us? Fine, perhaps you'll listen to Motion Twin's Steve Filby, one of the developers behind the highly anticipated *Dead Cells*: "I've corrupted a fair few poor souls with *Mario Kart* and a beverage on a Friday evening," he jokes, telling us how the ability to effortlessly transport the system, and easily engage in local multiplayer, has been something of a game changer when it comes to enhancing every day social situations.

"I bring my Switch every time I go out for dinner with my girlfriend," Aguirre will go on to tell us, giving but a small example of just how quickly the console has effortlessly seeped into the everyday lives of its owners. "We play co-op or competitive multiplayer games there while we wait for our food to arrive."

And if that seems a little far out for you, Team Cherry's William Pellen has a story that you'll surely all relate to: "Playing something like *The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild* or *Super Mario Odyssey* on the bus to work is something you have to experience yourself to really appreciate," admits the *Hollow Knight* developer. "It still feels kind of surreal sometimes; it just works so well."

IF THE YEARS HAVE PROVEN ANYTHING, IT'S THAT YOU SHOULD NEVER COUNT NINTENDO OUT OF A FIGHT. The company has a habit of defying expectations in imaginative and spectacular ways, but it must be said that it felt particularly difficult to put trust in it ahead of the launch of the Switch in March 2017.

The criticism against Nintendo's lacklustre third-party and indie support has only grown louder over the years, reaching something of an apex with the Wii U. The system was notorious for its lack of major releases outside of the first-party exclusives, forcing owners to endure long stretches of time with little to look forward to. To put it politely, the Wii U was a bitter disappointment – doubly so for fans that had stuck with Nintendo throughout the Wii era.

Take a difficult-to-develop for platform, a limited online infrastructure, not to mention middling system and software sales, and what do you get? We'll tell you: it's an ecosystem that few triple-A publishers and independent developers were eagerly rushing to support. In a difficult position, Nintendo stepped back; it examined its position, its audience, and it listened: to publishers, developers, analysts and, most importantly, the players.

The Switch represents all of its hard work and progress in this regard. Nintendo implemented huge changes to the way it conducts business with external partners, overhauled its approach to courting independent developers, changed its attitude to online and handheld play, and has subsequently delivered in Switch a console that none of us knew we wanted, but can now never leave home without.

In the last 12 months we've seen some of the biggest publishers in the world launch games on the system – Rockstar, Microsoft, EA, Bethesda and Ubisoft, to name just a few – and strong sales have ensured that more will be on the way eventually. On the surface, the publishers are incredibly happy with the system and its performance in the marketplace, though for many, there's a will to support Switch because of how well it fills a gap in the lives of its players. "To me, it certainly feels like the »

Switch console has hit a nice sweet spot," considers Roger Carpenter, executive producer at Microsoft, working on Mojang's *Minecraft: Switch Edition*. "I think it's the whole package, rather than [having] just one or two things that makes it work. It's got many player-pleasing features and, to be honest, we're so early in its lifecycle, I expect we've only just begun to see what might be possible in terms of game experiences. As a play-with-friends console, it does the job really well."

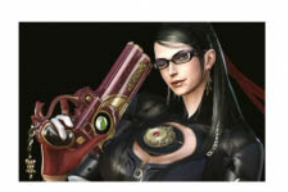
Much of this attitude stems from the quality of games and breadth of experiences that have appeared on the system in the last 12 months. While we've been impressed with the first-party titles, it is Nintendo's efforts in making development, certification and distribution easier for independent developers that has truly impressed us. This isn't just one of the major factors in the Switch's year one success – it's also the face of its future.

"We believe that consoles live or die by their software, and that ease of development ultimately determines both the quality and the volume of games that are available," Tim Rapp and Jay Mattis of High Horse Entertainment tell us, the duo hard at work on multiplayer action-sports game *Disk Jam*. "When the Nintendo Switch was first announced, we felt the idea was intriguing, but we didn't have any information about its capabilities. What people don't often realise is that there is more to hardware than just raw power. For example, different graphics chips will offer different feature sets. For developers on a new platform, this can be the difference between being able to just tweak your existing quality settings to get your game running smoothly versus having to render your scene completely differently."

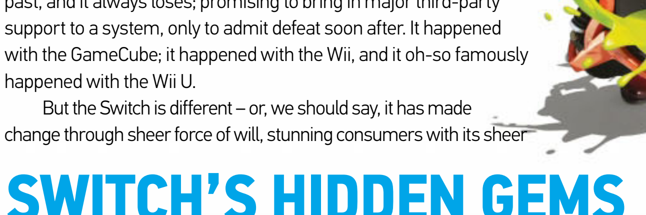
The creative duo raise an interesting point here. So much of the early conversation (and we're talking pre-launch here. Or, more to the point, pre-*Breath Of The Wild*) was dominated by talk of power – or lack thereof. The question of whether the system would be capable of running triple-A quality games hung over the Switch like a dark cloud; of whether publishers would even be interested in taking the financial risk of developing a version of its biggest titles for a console so clearly underpowered when compared to the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One (let alone the supercharged PS4 Pro and Xbox One X). We've seen Nintendo play this game in the past, and it always loses; promising to bring in major third-party support to a system, only to admit defeat soon after. It happened with the GameCube; it happened with the Wii, and it oh-so famously happened with the Wii U.

But the Switch is different – or, we should say, it has made change through sheer force of will, stunning consumers with its sheer versatility. "For consumers, this often means the difference between having the latest and greatest games versus ports from the last generation of titles. On this point, Nintendo really hit it out of the park, as evidenced by all of the Unreal Engine 4 games (like *Disc Jam*) coming to the platform in its first year, and current-gen triple-A titles like *Doom* getting released," continue Rapp and Mattis, highlighting just how well Nintendo has done courting different types of gaming experiences. "We believe it's a big contributor, not just to the Nintendo Switch's initial success, but to its long-term continued success."

> I THINK EVEN THE MOST DIEHARD NINTENDO FANS HAVE BEEN SURPRISED BY THE NUMBERS ACHIEVED DURING THESE FIRST 12 MONTHS
> **ADOLFO AGUIRRE**, LIENZO



With games like *Metroid Prime 4* and *Bayonetta 3* scheduled for release in 2018, we're certain that there is even more success on the way for Nintendo.



OF THE DEVELOPERS WE SPOKE WITH FOR THIS FEATURE, THERE WERE TWO POINTS THAT EACH SEEMED TO COME BACK TO: THE HYBRID NATURE OF THE CONSOLE, AND HOW EASY IT HAS BEEN TO DEVELOP FOR. The latter is an important one, given how notoriously difficult Nintendo has been to work with in the past, particularly for independent studios. As for the former, the fact that the Switch is a home console with strong portable capabilities is incredibly attractive to many developers and publishers.

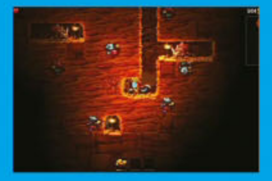
This includes Metanet Software, which is bringing acclaimed indie game N++ to Switch in 2018. "As a developer, it's really nice to know that our local co-op and competitive multiplayer modes are going to be really accessible for everyone, rather than something that fewer players will get to try because they have to take the next step and purchase additional controllers," admits Metanet's Raigan Burns. "As players, it's been really cool to see an influx of multiplayer games on Switch – on the weekend, this is how we like to unwind, so it's fantastic."

The technical and development side has been received in a similar way. Shin'en Multimedia has had plenty of experience with Nintendo's platforms, having brought close to 30 titles to the various platforms since 2001, including Switch launch game *Fast RMX*. "We already had titles published in eShop on Wii U, Wii, 3DS and also many at retail," says Manfred Linzner. "However, publishing on Switch was certainly the easiest we ever had it. It's a very streamlined process."

This is a sentiment shared across the industry. N++'s Burns is quick to reaffirm just how smooth the process of porting and working on Switch has been for the studio. "Working with Nintendo as a small indie team has never been easier," admits Burns. "It's incredibly exciting to see not only how the Switch has succeeded, but also how many indie teams have found success along with it – certainly this is something Nintendo can be proud of, as they've »

SWITCH'S HIDDEN GEMS

SOME LESSER KNOWN RELEASES THAT ARE MORE THAN WORTH YOUR TIME



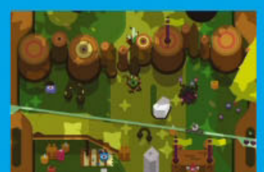
STEAMWORLD DIG 2

[1] As adventure platformers go, *Steamworld Dig 2* is among the best you could wish to play. Stunning art, inventive and evolving gameplay, challenging levels and an engaging story combine for a rare treat of a game.



BATTLE CHEF BRIGADE

[2] Mixing RPG hunting with a gem-matching cooking game, *Battle Chef Brigade* is one of the more unique genre hybrids we've seen in recent years, but a really fun idea. Go out on the hunt for ingredients and then return to cook up the perfect feast.



TUMBLESEED

[3] All you need to do is balance your seed on the platform as you scale a mountain. That's all. And yet somehow *Tumbleseed* turns into one of the most addictive rogue-like experiences we've ever played. A wonderful distillation of the genre.



KAMIKO

[4] A perfect fit on a Nintendo platform with its roots so firmly in Zelda's past, *Kamiko* is a fast-paced action RPG with three different characters to pick from and a world design inspired by Japanese Shinto beliefs. It's a little short, but also super cheap.



GOROGOA

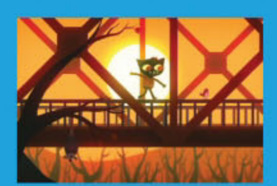
[5] An amazing puzzle experience that bends time and space with nothing more complex than moving up to four panels of art around the screen. The interplay of images is really something, and the revelation of solving the puzzles never grows tiresome.

The versatility of the Switch's design, working as both a home console and a handheld, has been a game-changer for the industry.



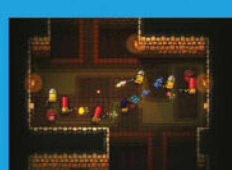
THE MUMMY DEMASTERED

[6] Put aside that this is supposed to be a videogame spin-off of the ill-conceived *Mummy* reboot with Tom Cruise, and you'll discover it's actually one of the best metroidvania titles of the last couple of years. But then it is made by the team behind the Shantae series, so no great surprise.



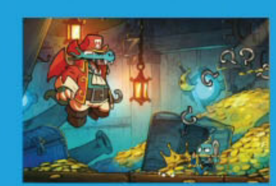
NIGHT IN THE WOODS

[7] Worth playing on any platform you might prefer to tackle it on, the fact that *Night In The Woods* was released on Switch may have passed you by. Explore the world, chat with the locals and watch as a sprawling adventure game unfolds before you.



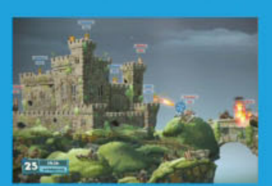
ENTER THE GUNGEON

[8] We fell in love with this bullet-hell shooter some time ago, and it's lost none of its appeal with time or a shift in platform. Delve into the Gungeon, spray bullets everywhere, kick over tables for cover and meet its wacky cast of characters. It's a blast.



WONDER BOY: THE DRAGON'S TRAP

[9] This remake of *Wonder Boy III* from way back in 1989 has a simply stunning art style and smoothness of animation. That this is then combined with fantastic character design, character-swapping gameplay and some wondeful levels makes the package complete.



WORMS W.M.D

[10] The Switch is a great place to play simple multiplayer titles, and the Worms series fits that bill very nicely. *W.M.D* adds in a crafting mechanic between turns to help keep both players more engaged throughout the game, which is a nice touch.





A LEAGUE OF ITS OWN

ROCKET LEAGUE DEVELOPER PSYONIX DISCUSSES THE IMPORTANCE OF CROSS-PLATFORM PLAY AND THIRD-PARTY PORTS FOR SWITCH

Why do you think remasters and third-party ports are succeeding on Switch?

Jeremy Dunham, Vice President, Publishing at Psyonix: Given that it's still the Switch's first year, it makes a lot of sense to release remasters and ports, because those are much quicker and (usually, but not always) easier for a team to build versus an all-new game. It's also a good idea to experiment on a new platform with a game you're already intimately familiar with; it allows you to quickly understand that platform's strengths and weaknesses, and it might also spark some creative ideas, since you have a real-life product to compare against in reality instead of theory. It should also be mentioned just how powerful nostalgia is. There are few things in life that carry that kind of power for a person, really, so a great way to entice people to come over to your new platform is to port some of your perspective audience's favourites from last year, or even 30 years ago if need be. In short, there are a lot of compelling reasons to go this route when supporting a new platform for the first time.

How important do you think it is to the success of the Switch that it allows for co-op and multiplayer gaming out of the box with its Joy-con design?

Dunham: I think it's too early to tell what the Joy-Con design will mean to the ultimate importance of the platform, but it sure seems that it's helped a lot. We liked it for *Rocket League* because it embodies the spirit of our game, which is very multiplayer and community driven. I believe the initial concept of having both a handheld and a console is the biggest selling point of the Switch, and that the other features are just really cool value-adds that enhance their hybrid machine's capabilities even further.

We'll know how well the Joy-Con design itself worked out over the next several years when we see how well it's supported by other third parties and Nintendo itself. Regardless, it's my view that the hybrid approach to the machine and the crazy potential of Nintendo's fantastic back catalogue is the Switch's most appealing attribute. Personally speaking, I hope the support for things like Tabletop mode stay strong; we like that kind of stuff a lot here at Psyonix.

Did you feel like it was important to ensure *Rocket League* arrived with cross-platform play on Switch?

Dunham: Absolutely. Without it, the audience would have only been reliant on playing against other Switch *Rocket League* owners, and that's an audience that's still under construction, let alone the platform itself. Our philosophy is that all games should be cross-platform anyway because it provides the best customer experience. If you told me that I couldn't call my brother because I have an iPhone and he has a Galaxy and one or both of those companies don't allow us to talk to each other, I would think that's pretty lame and would gravitate towards the devices that lets me call him instead. Videogame cross-play is the same concept.

In 2018, if you're not looking at your audience as one large global community who wants to play together then you're way behind what most gaming communities and individuals would want. We were thrilled that Nintendo allowed us to support cross-platform play without flinching. It said a lot about their commitment to Psyonix, *Rocket League*, their own community, and the industry as a whole.

What are your feelings on Nintendo's online infrastructure for Switch?

Dunham: The honest answer is that it's too early to tell because it's still a work in progress. Obviously, Nintendo's online infrastructure isn't as battle-tested or fully-featured as Xbox Live or PSN, and the 'Friend Codes' and 'Account Linking' setup isn't the cleanest way we've seen to handle those sorts of things, but it's coming along and we'll see where it all ends up.

The good news is that *Rocket League*'s online works well on the Switch, and that's the number-one thing that matters in online play: "does it work?" Our Cross-platform matchmaking is a snap on Switch, and there isn't any trouble finding a game. I should also mention that while it's not online, the Local Multiplayer support the system has is a great feature, and one we were glad to get behind.







been very open and accessible, even for tiny teams like ours."

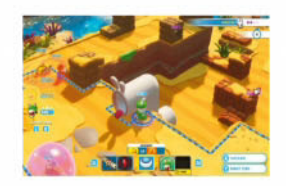
Switch is even beginning to be viewed as the number one destination for developers, ahead of the PS4 and Xbox One (in spite of their huge install bases), the reason being that studios are seeing huge return on their releases, benefitting from the large push Nintendo gives independent games through its Nindies initiative and in its Nintendo Directs. "It has been an absolute blast to work with Nintendo," adds Aguirre. "They've been very helpful throughout the process, and have driven *Mulaka* to incredible spotlights in front of their fanbase. There's always someone we can reach out to at any time, and we will continue to build a close relationship with them in the coming years. We don't see a future for our studio where we aren't working with the Switch."

Lizardcube's Omar Cornut suggests that not only has "Nintendo really improved their processes" internally, but he also believes that "it may be the easiest platform to work on" now, with the Switch release of his critical hit *Wonder Boy: The Dragon Trap* outselling all of the other platform versions (PC, PS4, Xbox One) combined. It's important that the system have success stories like this so early into his lifecycle. It should come as no surprise that almost two thirds of Switch owners have a copy of *Super Mario Odyssey*, with close to 50 per cent attach rate on both *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe* and *The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild*. As third-party titles and independent releases continue to gain traction, it ensures that more developers will rush to join the platform in the coming months. "There are a bunch of people working hard at Nintendo to convince great developers to get on board and bring their amazing games with them," says Motion Twin's Steve Filby. "Add that to the quality of Nintendo's own IP, and you've got a very attractive gaming system with a lot of choice in its games."

2018 IS GOING TO BE AN IMPORTANT YEAR FOR SWITCH. Nintendo has another slate of heavy hitters on the way: the likes of *Metroid Prime 4*, *Pokémon* and *Fire Emblem*. Huge third-party exclusives are coming by way of PlatinumGames and Grasshopper Manufacture too in *Bayonetta 3* and *Travis Strikes Again: No More Heroes*. And, in a telling move, big multi-platform games are arriving with an opportunity to change the perception of the system in the eyes of the 'core' player base: for many publishers, the success or failure of high-profile ports such as *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* and *PayDay 2* will likely have a big impact on business decisions going into E3 2018.

That isn't to say Nintendo doesn't have a few areas that it needs to approach with caution and improve for the new year. Some are still concerned with the company's approach to online infrastructure and multiplayer support, particularly as Nintendo begins to prepare for the leap to a paid subscription service. While the foundation is incredibly strong, it's still difficult to connect with friends while activating voice chat (currently available by way of a convoluted set-up process through the *Splatoon 2* companion app) is something of a nightmare. Solving these issues, we believe, will be key to Nintendo's strategy in 2018.

Mattis and Rapp believe the Switch offers a much improved infrastructure to what we've seen from the company in the past, though they too are eager to see Nintendo build on what it already and continue to promote its excellent cross-platform multiplayer support. "As a team of two former networking engineers, we were initially concerned about the console's online capabilities, as it hasn't been a primary focus for Nintendo in the past. We were pleasantly surprised when we were able to get *Disc Jam* up and running online and in local wireless mode relatively quickly. They were also quick to approve cross-play with other platforms,



Couch co-op has been threatening to make a big come back for some time now, but the Switch's two-player out of the box functionality makes this a sure thing.

IF YOU'RE NOT LOOKING AT YOUR AUDIENCE AS ONE LARGE GLOBAL COMMUNITY WHO WANTS TO PLAY TOGETHER THEN YOU'RE WAY BEHIND WHAT MOST GAMING COMMUNITIES AND INDIVIDUALS WOULD WANT

JEREMY DUNHAM, PSYONIX



Impressively, the attach rate for Switch defies all expectations. *Super Mario Odyssey* has sold over 9 million copies, while both *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe* and *The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild* have both shifted over 5 million units apiece.

which is something that we feel deserves special recognition, as it's something that is really net positive for players and not all console manufacturers are allowing that. Ultimately, Nintendo has built a lot of great online infrastructure for the console, and with their online service becoming paid in 2018, we're hoping that they'll be able to build that out even further!"

The Switch is also facing one issue far sooner than we had anticipated it to – that of storefront congestion. With such a huge emphasis on digital gaming, the system has seen a huge wave of titles arrive, far more than any of us thought possible (let alone likely). While Sony, Microsoft and Valve have spent many years and considerable resources learning how to best curate and present titles on the digital marketplace, it's something Nintendo will need to work on to keep visibility high for indie games and third-party releases. "For us as developers, and even as consumers, it's very important to have a storefront that allows for good visibility and filtering for quality titles and other categories," says Aguirre. "While the store is simple to navigate, we'd like to see how Nintendo approaches the issue of the eShop being maybe too over-flooded with content, as that has proven to be a big issue on other platforms like Steam."

Of course, these are problems for Nintendo to confront and overcome over the years ahead. For now, there's little that could be said about the first year of Switch that isn't universally positive. Nintendo's first-party exclusives have been incredible, the support of third-party developers is unexpectedly good, and the amount of fantastic indie games to launch on the system is simply unprecedented. As Nintendo celebrates the first anniversary of the Switch, it can look toward knowing it is in an immensely powerful position.

It's been fantastic to see Nintendo back to its best – leading the industry through innovative initiatives, evolutions of play, and with creativity at heart of everything that it does. So, how does it carry that spirit through the next 12 months? We'll hand that over to the developers themselves.

"Personally speaking, I'm really looking forward to picking up the retro games I loved as a kid when they start making their way to the eShop," says Psyonix's vice president Jeremy Dunham. "And I'm hopeful that we will indeed see *Metroid Prime 4* this year. I've been a fan of the franchise since the original game released on NES. Love that series!"

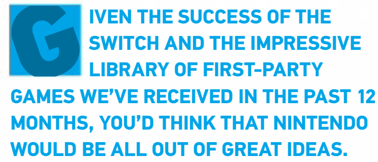
While some are excited about the return of classic game franchises, some are just excited at the return of modern fan favourites. "*Dark Souls*. It's sad, because of all the games that are coming out, I have to go back to an old favourite," Motion Twin's Steve Filby tells us, echoing a feeling shared by so many in the industry. "But I mean, that's really just for me a day one purchase. Then on top of that I'm excited about *Pokémon*, I emulated a lot of that when I was a kid, so it'll be nice to play one on the original system."

Of course, every developer we spoke to for this feature had an indie game in mind that they were excited to play. "The constant influx of great indie titles has been good," says Team Cherry's William Pellen, one of the many to shout out *Celeste* – an excellent platformer which just launched the system. "I look forward to popping open the eShop every few weeks to grab some new stuff! I'm really loving *Celeste* at the moment… and I've held off on *Night In The Woods* for its Switch release too," he says, adding, "Keen for that new Kirby too!" As are we, as are we; in fact, turn a few pages for an in-depth guide to the 28 hottest games coming in 2018 because, honestly, we could go on forever here. If there's one thing we can say for certain it's this: developers love the Nintendo Switch, and you'd better believe some incredible games are on the way from them all in 2018. »



THE EVOLUTION OF PLAY

WHY NINTENDO LABO IS AN EXCITING NEW DIRECTION FOR NINTENDO AND COULD BE THE END OF PLASTIC PERIPHERALS



GIVEN THE SUCCESS OF THE SWITCH AND THE IMPRESSIVE LIBRARY OF FIRST-PARTY GAMES WE'VE RECEIVED IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS, YOU'D THINK THAT NINTENDO WOULD BE ALL OUT OF GREAT IDEAS. But here we are, barely into 2018, and the company has turned the industry on its head all over again – come on already, give somebody else a chance! Nintendo Labo is launching on 27 April, and it's going to change the way our imaginations coalesce with the wonderful world of videogames. It could be the evolution of play as we know it and, once again, it all starts here on the Nintendo Switch.

It's funny how things work out sometimes. Back in 2012, notorious industry analyst Michael Pachter joked that should Nintendo ever make a cardboard box and slap its logo on the side of it, fans of the company would still buy it. Well, what do you know; it's taken a decade, but one of Pachter's predictions has finally come (mostly) true!

To put it simply, Nintendo Labo is a set of interactive build-and-play experiences. It's a toy and software line that asks players to build intricate constructions from sheets of cardboard, later combining them with the Switch and Joy-Cons to unlock new and innovative avenues of play.

Each project – known internally as a Toy-Con – comes with branded sheets of cardboard, rubber bands, string and other assorted craftwork items. It will also be bundled in with software that features detailed interactive instructions and a relevant mini-game designed to showcase your new construction.

Nintendo has so far shown off just six of the projects that make up the first wave, and they effortlessly capture a sense of childlike imagination – the do-it-yourself spirit that any of you who spent childhoods playing with cardboard boxes will immediately recognise. These projects span everything from larger pieces, such as a fully functional piano and a kit that transforms you into an autonomous robot, alongside smaller constructs that let you fashion items like steering wheels, fishing rods, RC Cars, controllable creatures and even a camera. While Labo is predominantly designed for kids, it's clear that an adult will need to be present and accounted for in the construction stage. Is this fun for all the family, or the sort of headache parents could do without? That much isn't clear just yet, but we're banking on it likely being the former.

The Robot Kit, one of two kits available at launch (and the most expensive revealed so far), will, for example, takes a number of hours to piece together. It has foot straps, a visor, and a big bloody backpack that will not only need to be built from the templates, but then connected together with an intricate system of strings and bands – necessary so that the game registers your arm and foot movements as you control a robot hell-bent on levelling a city that's being displayed in the Switch-holding visor.

It's such a wild idea. All of the projects demonstrated thus far have an exciting, almost magical quality about them. They capture the imagination and a childlike sense of wonder, joining with the excellent force-feedback found in the Joy-Cons to create some truly impressive experiences.

We will always lament the death of the plastic peripheral. The extension of play and the newfound sense of immersion they introduced to gaming will never be forgotten – though the amount of space they consumed in our homestead certainly will be. Nintendo has taken all of this in its stride and delivered a product that not only delivers new avenues for play, but something that can exist as a learning tool; as a way of bringing people and families together, and as a conduit for unlocking creativity. And when it's all said and done, it can be easily flatpacked and stored away for another day without consuming the entirely of your living room. Nintendo Labo is unlike anything we've seen before on console, and it has the potential to be huge.

■ Should you break the Labo cardboard sheets that come in the box, Nintendo has promised to provide free templates online that can be printed out and overlaid over your own cardboard that you may have about the house.

FOR EIGHT YEARS NOW, MAKEDO HAS BEEN IN THE BUSINESS OF CARDBOARD CONSTRUCTION. WHILE NINTENDO'S HOPES AND ASPIRATIONS WITH LABO ARE SOMETHING OF A MYSTERY TO THE VIDEOGAME WORLD, **WE SPOKE WITH MAKEDO DIRECTOR AND FOUNDER PAUL JUSTIN TO GET A SENSE OF WHAT WE CAN EXPECT FROM THIS EXCITING NEW VENTURE**

What exactly does Makedo do?

Paul Justin: Makedo is a set of tools for cardboard construction. At its core it's really just like masking tape or a glue that's something you can use to connect cardboard and make things. But I guess as a brand, what we try to do is really open up people's minds to the possibilities of what they can do to really unleash their imagination.

We have a kid-friendly view. All of the design is so that kids are enabled to create with cardboard independently as much as possible. Again, that just supports the idea that we want kids to be able to convert their imagination into something without adults coming in and going, "That's not straight" or "That's wrong." The adult notions of what's right and wrong interfere, I think, with kids play. Often you'll see a kid's drawing and there are arms coming out of the head instead of out of the body, and for a child that's fine. They should be free to do that sort of thing, whether they're in two dimensions or three dimensions.

Was there any particular reason why cardboard was chosen over some other material?

Justin: Well, it's so ubiquitous. It's so available. I think that helps, but its qualities are that it's a great material for making things. In some ways it's like building with timber, but you've just got so much more control – the cardboard box is in the toy hall of fame, which is good.

There's always been the cliche that kids enjoy the box more than the toy that came in it.

Justin: Yeah, I'm banking on it.

Could you tell us a little about the manufacturing process?

Justin: I guess there are two styles of products: one is where we just supply the bits; the connectors and the tools for manipulating the cardboard, cutting and connecting. That stuff we injection mould in China and pack in different configurations so that people can use it in the way that's right for them. In the eight years since we started we've been through two phases and one phase was imbedded heavily in the toy market.

There's a lot of pressure within the toy market to dumb down the product, giving people more of the finished product so that they use less of their imagination. And we did go down that path, so that involved progressively over a number of years putting more and more of the kit in the box to a point where we literally put every bit of cardboard in the box and our connectors and specific instructions on how to make that exact thing, so that the kit was no longer tools for imagination. It was just a kit to make that thing. That's the LEGO model. The old LEGO kits were just bricks and the new LEGO kits are the Millennium Falcon, and will be exactly that thing – and it would be sacrilegious to make something else other than what the picture on the box is.



■ Visit int.make.do for more details on Makedo and where you can find its products.

But we've moved away from that. I do have experience in that process of preparing cardboard to be sold as part of an actual product, but we don't do it anymore.

Was there an environmental angle to this?

Justin: Absolutely. We hoped to change the way people think. When they start using Makedo they're suddenly walking around the house and kids are telling their parents, "Don't throw that out. That's a building block for me." So there's definitely a mental shift. And the other thing is that when I came up with the idea for Makedo, one of the elements that I was really excited about is that everybody has access to the bulk of the building stuff, the building materials they've already got, so I don't need to ship it out to anyone. And that's kind of cool, because it's so available, it's free, and it takes up the most bulk, so why would I go and make that in China, put it on a boat, ship it out? But I can see for Nintendo that would never work. There are different drivers.

What did you make of Nintendo's approach to Labo?

Justin: I think it's exciting, actually. I think it's good when however many millions of people have now been impacted by and getting exposed to the idea of cardboard as a building material, as a link to imaginative play and another world. That's great. I'm all for that. I think their execution has been pretty good. They're very highly engineered and very refined models that they've got. They are really impressive.

It oddly also makes sense for Nintendo.

Justin: Yeah, I think it looks great, especially if they can open it up a bit. Cardboard is reasonably durable. The reason we've got so much cardboard in our world is that it can protect goods, its core functionality is to be tough and take impact and be durable, but obviously not compared to other things that are ultimately eternal landfill. I think it strikes a really nice balance where it's tough when it needs to be, and then it comes to the end of its life and it's easily recycled, which is good. I think that's a great quality in a material.

I've seen a little bit of backlash from people saying, "It's going to get trashed in a minute," and watching that video, I thought all of those creations look like they're crisp out of the box. They didn't look like they had been used more than for the photoshoot. If they can somehow embrace the ability to hack it, improve it… I saw that you can colour in and use sticky tape, that to me is like decoration – that's not actually fixing it if it was genuinely broken. But if there's a way to do that then I think it's great.

Another benefit must be that it's also lightweight and unlikely to hurt anyone.

Justin: Well, I suppose the biggest risk is papercuts [laughs].

ALL OF THE PROJECTS DEMONSTRATED THUS FAR HAVE AN EXCITING, ALMOST MAGICAL QUALITY ABOUT THEM



BETTER TOGETHER

MOJANG DISCUSSES ITS DECISION TO BRING MINECRAFT TO SWITCH

***Minecraft* is one of the biggest games in the world, with 74 million active players. Was it important to get the game out on Switch so early in the console's cycle?**

Roger Carpenter, Executive Producer, Microsoft/Mojang: If I'm honest, getting it out early in the cycle wasn't our main driver. We were already on a roll with working with Nintendo with the Wii U edition. The community were fab to interact with, Nintendo were great to work with, and when Nintendo asked us if we would be interested in bringing the game to their new console during their launch time, I don't think we missed a beat in saying yes. Being there with your players from the start of something new means you get to grow together.

Has there been anything about developing for the Switch that has surprised you?

Carpenter: Simply put, it's been a really good experience. I think the time we spent on the Wii U development set us up well. Aside from experiencing the platform having its finishing touches applied to it as we also finished off the game, which is pretty normal when new hardware is concerned, it has been a normal development. There haven't been any nasty surprises, that's for sure; the console is very well suited for *Minecraft*. I guess the surprise is how good a match the game is with the console, you always aim and hope for that, but the end result speaks for itself.

What was behind the decision to bring cross-platform play to Switch across Windows 10, mobile and Xbox One devices?

Carpenter: Wanting everyone to share their *Minecraft* experience has been part of the thinking for a long time. Even before the Xbox 360 Edition and Pocket Edition versions released I recall plenty of chatter between the teams about one day that being possible. It just seems natural to think that way with *Minecraft*. With the current generation of consoles, PCs and handheld devices, cross-platform play possibilities aren't particularly gated by the hardware performance. They're all within shouting distance of each other, so why not make it happen? I guess it was more of a case of why wouldn't we give more *Minecraft* players the ability to play with their friends regardless of where their friends were playing *Minecraft*. Bringing Switch into it was just 'of course'.

The 'Better Together' update feels like such an important milestone for *Minecraft* – how difficult has it been to implement elements like cross-platform play and the marketplace for the system?

Carpenter: Cross-device multiplayer has been a significant development effort across the Minecraft team since we united mobile and PC in 2015, VR in 2016, and then brought in Xbox this past year. It is still ongoing, we have more to layer-in as we build out the next experiences for players. There have been times when things have taxed us, but there haven't been too many surprises – it's just development! The backbone parts of cross-platform play and new marketplace have been developed with support from other Microsoft teams outside the *Minecraft* studio as well, so that's been a great help, and probably allowed us to do more than we hoped for.

Breath Of The Wild	2.20 MILLION
Super Mario Odyssey	1.90 MILLION
Mario Kart 8 Deluxe	1.58 MILLION
Splatoon 2	770K
Arms	500K

14 MILLION

SWITCH CONSOLES SOLD IN FIRST YEAR

13.6 sales of Wii U in five years

Breath Of The Wild
Super Mario Odyssey
Mario Kart 8 Deluxe
Splatoon 2
Arms

JAPAN BOUGHT MORE COPIES OF SPLATOON 2 THAN NORTH AMERICA AND EUROPE COMBINED

CONSOLE SALES IN MILLIONS

AFTER 10.5 MONTHS

14.86 MILLION

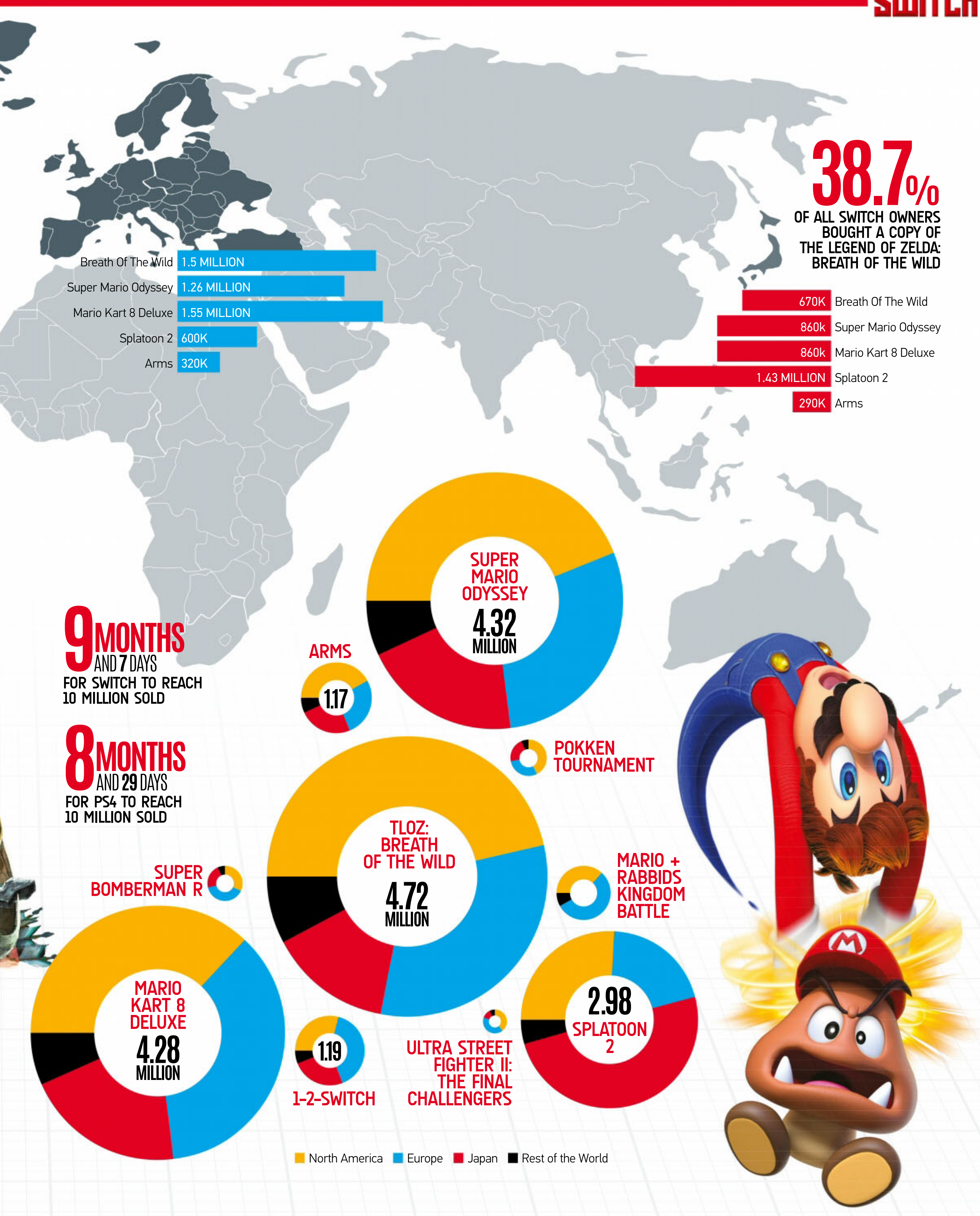
3.91 MILLION

5.9 MILLION

7 MILLION

5.63 MILLION

13.5 MILLION


Breath Of The Wild 1.5 MILLION
Super Mario Odyssey 1.26 MILLION
Mario Kart 8 Deluxe 1.55 MILLION
Splatoon 2 600K
Arms 320K
38.7%
OF ALL SWITCH OWNERS BOUGHT A COPY OF THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD
670K Breath Of The Wild
860k Super Mario Odyssey
860k Mario Kart 8 Deluxe
1.43 MILLION Splatoon 2
290K Arms
9 MONTHS AND 7 DAYS FOR SWITCH TO REACH 10 MILLION SOLD
8 MONTHS AND 29 DAYS FOR PS4 TO REACH 10 MILLION SOLD
SUPER MARIO ODYSSEY 4.32 MILLION
ARMS 1.17
POKKEN TOURNAMENT
TLOZ: BREATH OF THE WILD 4.72 MILLION
SUPER BOMBERMAN R
MARIO + RABBIDS KINGDOM BATTLE
MARIO KART 8 DELUXE 4.28 MILLION
1.19 1-2-SWITCH
ULTRA STREET FIGHTER II: THE FINAL CHALLENGERS
2.98 SPLATOON 2
North America
Europe
Japan
Rest of the World

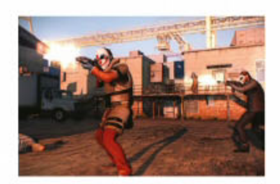
28 MUST-PLAY GAMES FOR 2018



YOSHI

GOOD-FEEL | Q3 2018

[1] Still to get a proper name and release date, Yoshi's first solo outing on the Switch is looking to be even more inventive than usual, this time embracing a felt and papercraft style (expect a super-cute amiibo to be in the works). In gameplay terms, this has been translated to a 2D world that can be flipped to see the opposite side. It's a really nice idea that instantly brings all sorts of puzzles to mind.



PAYDAY 2

OVERKILL SOFTWARE | 27 FEBRUARY 2018

[2] This is going to be a great test of Nintendo's online infrastructure, delivering a level of connected shooter that the Switch has yet to be blessed with. To sweeten the deal, you'll be getting a timed exclusive in the form of Joy, a new hacker with a very cool LED mask. If it all comes together, this is a great game to come back to on a new platform.



WARGROOVE

CHUCKLEFISH | TBC 2018

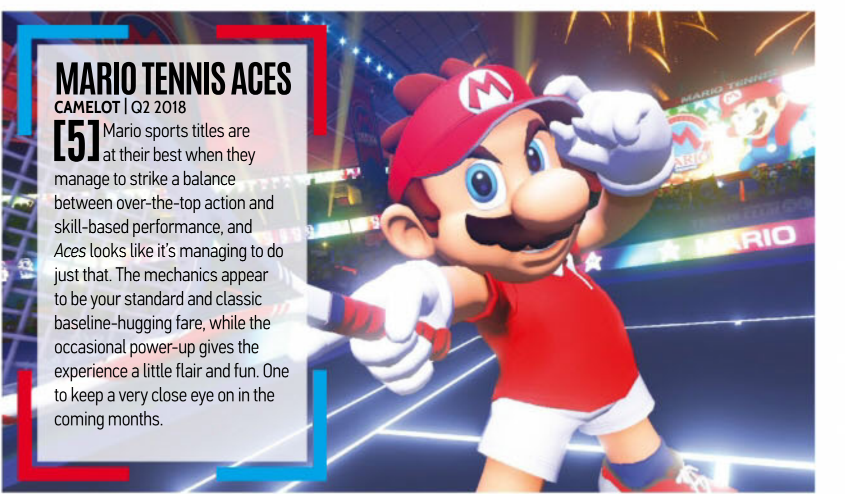
[3] We're very excited about *Wargroove* and its arrival on Switch, not least because its similarities to *Advance Wars* and *Fire Emblem* makes Nintendo's console its spiritual home. The tactical gameplay, tantalising level design and gorgeous pixelart style were enough to grab our attention, but the promise of four-player multiplayer is an excellent addition too.



BAYONETTA 3

PLATINUMGAMES
TBC 2018

[4] We don't know much about Platinum's plans for *Bayonetta 3*, but we can be fairly certain that they have been simmering away for some time. Ever since the launch of *Bayonetta 2*, in fact, the team behind the series has been saying that it had plenty of ideas for how to take everyone's favourite gun-booted witch forward, so long as the last instalment was a success. What we can discern from the teaser is that this looks like a sequel rather than a prequel given Bayonetta's outfit and that she appears to be up against someone who is more than her match in speed and accuracy. As always, in Platinum we trust.



MARIO TENNIS ACES

CAMELOT | Q2 2018

[5] Mario sports titles are at their best when they manage to strike a balance between over-the-top action and skill-based performance, and *Aces* looks like it's managing to do just that. The mechanics appear to be your standard and classic baseline-hugging fare, while the occasional power-up gives the experience a little flair and fun. One to keep a very close eye on in the coming months.





TRAVIS STRIKES AGAIN: NO MORE HEROES

GRASSHOPPER MANUFACTURE | Q3 2018

[6] As Suda51 marks ten years since the launch of *No More Heroes* and one of the Nintendo Wii's strangest exclusives, we can finally look forward to Travis Touchdown returning. Powered by Unreal Engine, Travis will be sucked into a game console and forced to play through a series of different indie games in order to survive. And we don't just mean a bunch of winks and nods to indie games, but the real deal. So far, we know that the worlds of *Hotline Miami* and *Shovel Knights* will be among the 15 indie games crossing over into Travis' world. The gameplay, however, will remain true to the classic combo-driven combat and exploration that has been well-established by the series so far.



2064: READ ONLY MEMORIES INTEGRAL

MIDBOSS | Q1 2018

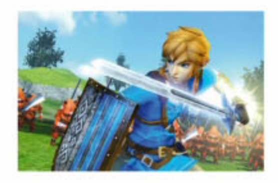
[7] If you haven't picked up on *2064* previously then you should know it's an interactive narrative game with point-and-click elements, real-time combat and a fantastic story at its heart. You play as a journalist, partnered with an AI looking for its missing creator. It sits nicely between classic adventure and visual novel, with just enough interaction to keep it engaging. Perfect for mobile play, basically.



KENTUCKY ROUTE ZERO: TV EDITION

CARDBOARD COMPUTER | Q1 2018

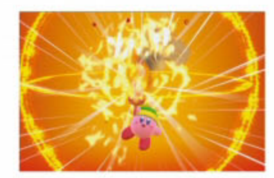
[8] This ongoing episodic series is finally reaching its conclusion, and as a result we'll be getting this complete version landing on all the major systems soon. *Kentucky Route Zero* has quietly been one of the best narrative adventures of recent years, and we can't wait to see how it all comes together with the finale. Being able to experience it again on the Switch is a very tempting offer.



HYRULE WARRIORS: DEFINITIVE EDITION

TECMO KOEI | 27 APRIL 2018

[9] Similar to how *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe* offered the ultimate version of the Mushroom Kingdom's last karting outing, this Definitive Edition of Tecmo Koei's brawler includes every character and DLC expansion from both the Wii U and 3DS versions of the game. Plus, you'll be able to play as Link and Zelda as they appeared in *Breath Of The Wild*. All of that aside though, this is a really fun new way to experience Hyrule and this universe.



KIRBY STAR ALLIES

HAL LABORATORY | 16 MARCH 2018

[10] HAL Laboratory just refuses to stand still for a moment with the Kirby titles, this time offering an action platforming experience that pushes the powers and abilities of its characters more than ever before. By bringing characters into your party their different skills can be combined to some incredible effects. Co-op for up to four players rounds off a very fun-looking new Kirby adventure.

METROID PRIME 4

TBC | TBC 2018

[11] What can we tell you about *Metroid Prime 4*? Well, we can tell you that long-serving producer Kensuke Tanabe continues on the series, although this time he will be working with a newly formed development team, as Retro Studios has moved on to other titles. It's been more than ten years since *Metroid Prime 3: Corruption*, and the less said about *Federation Force*, the better, so the slate is more or less clear for a new team to stamp its authority and creativity on the Metroid series.

Tanabe has suggested that this will be a story that wraps together the threads of the previous games while also setting things up for the future. It will be a first-person title like the previous Prime games, and older interviews hinted that a time-shifting mechanic might be something it will explore.



PROJECT OCTOPATH TRAVELLER

SQUARE ENIX | TBC 2018

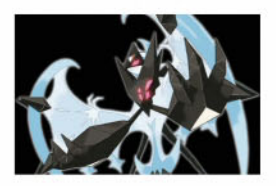
[12] This is one of the most intriguing RPGs coming to any platform in 2018, and with a pixelart style that's been merged with 3D world design and environments, there's an additional sense of otherworldliness that you won't find anywhere else in this game. There are eight characters to pick from, each with their own stories and ways of completing the game. Keep this one high on the watchlist.



FIRE EMBLEM FOR SWITCH

INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS | TBC 2018

[13] It's been a long while since we last saw *Fire Emblem* on a home console (ten years, in fact), so it's good to know that the Switch will be hosting the continuing battles of the series later this year. No word yet on exact gameplay or timeline for this one, although we can be fairly confident Intelligent Systems will be looking to go big with this sequel.



POKÉMON FOR SWITCH

GAMEFREAK | TBC 2018

[14] It's fantastic to know that a mainline Pokémon game will be coming to the Switch, but speculation persists as to just how standalone that experience might be. There's some good money on this being a spin-off from *Sun* and *Moon* on the 3DS (*Pokémon Star*?) allowing for trading across devices via the Pokémon Bank app. That would be a really interesting move, but a completely new game would be even better.



DEAD CELLS

MOTION TWIN | TBC 2018

[15] Motion Twin has pitched its gorgeous pixelart release as a Roguevania game, mixing the exploration of a Castlevania with the challenge and procedural generation more typical in a rogue-like release. The result is compelling and testing, keeping you on your toes with new areas, tough enemies and permanent skill unlocks that aid your progress as you go. It's doing well in Early Access right now, so hopefully a full release is around the corner.



SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI 5

ATLUS | TBC 2018

[16] This will be the first home console release in the main Shin Megami Tensei series for some time, but the development team has expressed its feeling that the multi-functional design of the Switch means it can be a great middle ground for fans to experience the game at home on a TV or out and about. It also means that Atlus can flex its design muscles a little with this one. We're expecting an impressive new look.



MULAKA

LIENZO | TBC 2018

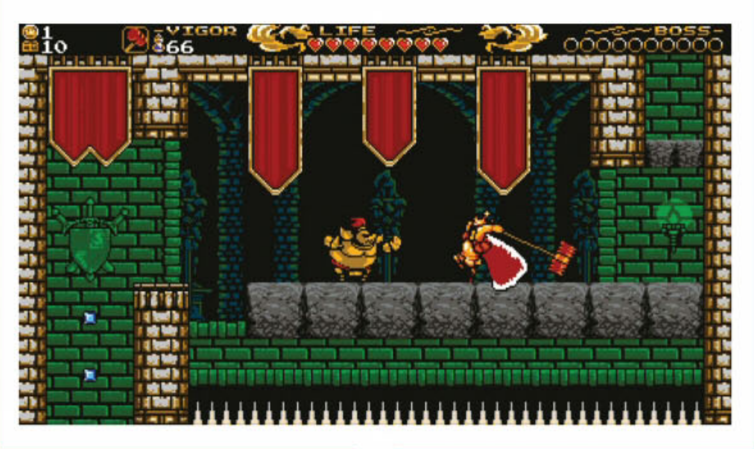
[17] Following in the footsteps of *Never Alone*, *Mulaka* is a wonderful, but rare, example of a game that seeks to celebrate a marginalised culture while also bringing us an innovative gameplay experience. In this instance the focus is the Tarahumara of Northwestern Mexico, and the result is a wonderfully colourful and action-packed adventure against mythical beasts and with incredible powers to call upon.



SHOVEL KNIGHT: KING OF CARDS

YACHT CLUB GAMES | Q1 2018

[18] Rounding out the Shovel Knight series is your chance to play as the King Knight, travelling through four new worlds and 30 new courses. These games have always felt like wonderful throwbacks to classic NES games so seeing this run on the Switch feels like a real homecoming for the series. And to add to the value there's a fun new card game to try out. Could this be the new Gwent? We'll keen to find out.





INDIVISIBLE

LAB ZERO GAMES | Q3 2018

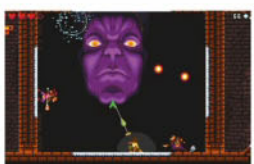
[19] This side-scrolling RPG adventure has been high on our list of indies to watch for some time and for a number of reasons. The art style, spinning out from Lab Zero's previous game *Skullgirls*, has a wonderful cartoon sheen and a smoothness to its animation, while the platforming looks to offer some fun exploration potential, and the combat jumps between realtime and active battle depending on the threat.



YOKU'S ISLAND EXPRESS

VILLA GORILLA | TBC 2018

[20] It's not every year that you get to play a game as a dung beetle delivering mail on an island inhabited by a deity. Even rarer still is a platforming adventure with pinball mechanics. But that's what Villa Gorilla has been crafting, a mix of genres that brings pace and explosive action to what might otherwise have been a cute but pedestrian experience. The gorgeous painting art style doesn't do any harm either.



DANDARA

LONG HAT HOUSE | 6 FEB 2018

[21] At its core, *Dandara* is a tale of the oppressed rising up against their oppressors and exposing the corruption at the heart of their society, but how that's presented through an ever-expanding action adventure with gravity-defying jumping skills from its titular heroine makes it something more than its premise alone. *Dandara* is bringing really fun new twists to the classic metroidvania style.

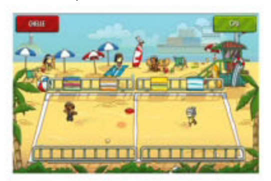




LIGHT FINGERS

NUMIZMATIC | Q1 2018

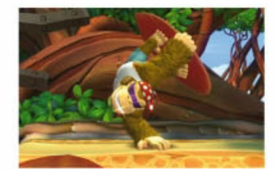
[22] Bringing tabletop gaming to a fantasy world, this is the game that thieves would be playing if they had a clockwork tabletop they could wager all of their ill-gotten gains on of an evening. *Light Fingers* has some incredible animation and table design as the world unfolds before you and dungeon challenges emerge from beneath the table to offer real-time action sequences.



SCRIBBLENAUTS SHOWDOWN

SHIVER ENTERTAINMENT | 6 MARCH 2018

[23] We've always loved the premise and execution of the Scibblenauts series, rewarding players who can think of the most fun nouns with all sorts of fun interactions and results as you attempt to solve the puzzle of each level. This release changes up the formula a little by applying similar rules to a party game. That sounds like it could be an anarchic and very fun combination.



DONKEY KONG COUNTRY: TROPICAL FREEZE

RETRO STUDIOS | 4 MAY 2018

[24] There are so many games launched on the Wii U that simply didn't get the love and appreciation they deserved globally because the system just wasn't in enough homes, but with the Switch outselling it in a single year, *Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze* is one of many titles that can get a second chance on the system. The addition of Funky Kong with a plethora of new skills adds even more fun to the game.

DARK SOULS: REMASTERED

FROMSOFTWARE | 25 MAY 2018

[25] There has been talk of *Dark Souls* getting the remaster treatment for some time, and it's going to be interesting to see which version ultimately gets the most attention. We suspect that this might be a great proof of the theory that thanks to Switch's mobile functionality, when the option is there to play on it or other platforms many will choose to play on Nintendo's console. We've yet to see that tested properly just yet, but it's fair to say that based on our experience so far, playing remasters and re-releases on Switch feels a lot fresher than playing similar games on PS4 and Xbox One. As it stands, this remaster contains the full game, plus the *Artorias Of The Abyss* DLC.



OWLBOY

D-PAD STUDIO | 13 FEBRUARY 2018

[26] We loved *Owlboy* on PC, but we really wanted to have it on a console, and it should be a fantastic fit on the Switch. This pixelart platformer has been in development for a very long time, but its simple style and depth of mechanics actually makes it a perfect fit for the current wave of indie titles. It's actually an open world that is fully explorable thanks to its mix of flight and platforming.



BLOODSTAINED: RITUAL OF THE NIGHT

ARTPLAY, DICO, INTI CREATES, ARMATURE STUDIO | MARCH 2018

[27] It feels like this game has been in development for an age, but that's what comes from crowdfunding a new title; it means we hear about it earlier, but have to wait a little extra time than we've become used to for it to see a final release. Some Early Access for backers showed us that it's coming together well and recent reveals of the crafting system show there's some great depth to the game too.



SUPER MEAT BOY FOREVER

TEAM MEAT | TBC 2018

[28] Team Meat is promising to outdo itself with this one as it delivers not only a super challenging platformer, but one that adapts and learns from how you play so that the next time you go to a level it becomes even harder than the last time. Sounds pretty crazy, but we would expect nothing less from this group of developers. And it's been streamlined for two-button control, which will be very interesting indeed.

FIRE, FURY AND FARCE

AS WE GET OUR FINAL AND EXTENDED HANDS-ON TEST WITH *FAR CRY 5* WE EXPLAIN ITS CORE ATTRIBUTES AND GAMEPLAY MODES AND EXPLORE WHY IT'S REALLY NOT AS POLITICALLY CHARGED AS YOU MIGHT HAVE THOUGHT

F*ar Cry 5* is launching with a lot of attention on it for a number of reasons. It's the first triple-A release from one of the major studios this year, it's the fifth game in a long-running, much-loved series that stands a chance of breaking really big and it appears to be priming itself to take on some serious modern societal commentary with its setting and enemies.

With all of that weighing on it, there's been a lot of talk about how and why *Far Cry 5* is approaching its mechanics and missions, but little on how, and that's what we wanted to concentrate on with our last hands-on before review to offer our final verdict before Ubisoft's opening release of the year.

We've had a few chances to play the game over the last few months and enjoyed much of what we had played, although we always felt that we left with a lot of questions yet to be answered. With our latest hands-on we wanted to try and answer as many of those as possible and hopefully put to bed any concerns we might have had about the game's approach to its story and mission structure. We wanted to see what it would be like to play aimlessly, which is really what playing a really good sandbox game should allow you to do.

What we discovered was a game that seems well-primed to offer a lot of different styles of play, that appears to embrace the absurdity of its premise in a way that is far less grim-faced than we anticipated and a game that, while still having some issues, should be exactly the kind of shooter we need to take us into the spring.





PUTTING THE FUN IN FUNDAMENTALISM

Our overriding feeling after a few hours of playing *Far Cry 5* was 'this really isn't as dark or heavy as we were expecting'. In actuality this game isn't a damning indictment of modern US politics or even a digitised version of *Deliverance*. If we were looking for a cinematic equivalent right now, we would say *Far Cry 5* has more in common with *Smokey And The Bandit*. And you know what? We're actually kind of relieved about that.

Relieved because while the predominant talking points around the game have been its depiction of extremist political and religious fanatics taking over a small town in Montana, the reality of the experience in gameplay terms is about setting up a big baddie that you can feel justified and remorseless about blowing up and peppering with bullets. Perhaps we should have picked up on that earlier on in the build up to release, but as we were dropped into the middle of the game with a star-spangled assault rifle in hand, it became rather difficult to seek for deep political polemic or even satire in this game's setting.

No, *Far Cry 5* is a pure action experience at heart. It's a playground for living out your wildest action fantasies and, thanks to even more open-ended and connected design, it can live up to that promise better than ever.

Over an extended period of play, the structure of *Far Cry 5* feels pretty loose. While the missions are clearly marked as primary and secondary in your menu, you're not going to feel the pressing weight of keeping up with the main thread of story with every passing minute. As you pass through settlements and clear outposts for the Resistance you'll pick up challenges and errands from the civilians you meet. There are a ton of characters too, all with really nicely rounded-out backstories, giving Hope County, Montana a far more complete and believable sense of place and time than some of the previous Far Cry titles. While tonally it may not take itself as seriously as we might have thought a while back, the attention to detail and depth of attention being paid to building this world has not been lacking.

And so you go out on little bandit runs against Eden's Gate, pinching back fancy cars and trucks, driving them through roadblocks and picking off stragglers. When it's at its best, *Far Cry 5*'s many challenges feel like wonderfully orchestrated and escalated action set pieces. When it doesn't quite come together it can feel rather samey, but there are enough options in how you approach something like an Eden's Gate Outpost that you need to liberate (which is a recurring objective through the game) that you should be able to keep it interesting for yourself as you play.

The cultists actually offering a fairly aggressive response to your presence in the game helps this. Some can be bullet sponges for your attacks, which means you'll need to consider how you take them out and in what order (unless you're the spray and pray kind of player, which is just fine). If you can clear an outpost without raising an alarm then you earn bonus rewards, but even if all hell breaks loose it's a great excuse to try out some proximity mines on the pathways leading into the base.

The real joy of playing *Far Cry 5* comes from the combination of everything else and the way in which it can reward aimless exploration and curiosity. Going on a hunting expedition through the woods, going fishing for a little while, stealthing your way through a base, picking off enemy vehicles and freeing the kidnapped people within, chasing down fuel trucks, taking to the skies in a plane and dropping on the enemy… the list of things to do goes on and on. Perhaps *Far Cry 5* demands that as players we bring a little bit more self-motivation to keep doing those things than other games, and perhaps it doesn't lead you by the hand to give you some sense of direction and urgency, but we think that might be for the best.

We're still not sure that Hope County, Montana offers the most exciting and varied location in the recent series' lifespan, and we think it might feel a little repetitive from time to time, but this is peak Far Cry for inciting aimless action and chaos.



■ We have to say, we felt the game played at its best in stealth situations, but more often than not a mistake or misplaced guard is all it takes for things to turn into mayhem, and that's not so bad either.

ACTION DISTRACTIONS

The main story missions and side quests of *Far Cry 5* offer hours and hours of interest, but as you would expect and demand from a sandbox game like this one, that's not the end of the list of things you can do. One of the things we became quite engaged with in this game when we played a near-final build was the quantity and variety of other distractions and bite-size activities we could put our mind to. There are the organised activities like fishing and hunting, for instance, which can take up as much or as little of your time as you want. You also have some racing challenges, and these we were pleasantly surprised by.

We're actually not the biggest fans of racing missions in sandbox games. Invariably, the driving mechanics in these games pale in comparison to dedicated racing titles, and as such they can feel like rather cheap imitations, eating up time we could be spending shooting things. In *Far Cry 5* you have what appears to be a series of stunt racing circuits inspired by the fictional stunt driver Clutch Nixon. These rather mad courses involved jumps, tight corners and seemingly driving a car that's on fire through water-spouting checkpoints. They're a good laugh and can be played as co-op multiplayer challenges, too, if you fancy.

Out in the world, just driving around on the streets, you can engage in the free-form challenges of hostage vans and fuel trucks, picking off the drivers and helping out the population as a result. These are great places to look at unlocking in-game milestones to earn tokens for new perks. The game keeps feeding back in on itself to reward your exploration and to reward you changing up your approach from time to time.

■ The absense of towers doesn't mean there's no height in the game's landscape for leaping around in a wingsuit. You will need to look for more natural jumping boards or climb some other buildings, but that side of the game is still available to you.



TEAMING UP

Far Cry 5 is a game best shared from what we've experienced of the game, and we don't just mean that it's best played in co-op. It's also best experienced by taking advantage of the Guns For Hire and Fangs For Hire mechanics of the game.

Guns For Hire is a really fun way of enhancing and augmenting your experience moment-to-moment as you hire NPCs you meet in the game world to assist you out in the field. These temporary squad members each have specialities, whether that's as general soldiers, range snipers or perhaps even a pilot. Each might be better suited to a particular type of mission or just open up new options for how you approach. For instance, having a sniper with you and positioned in a good vantage point can be very handy for a stealth approach as you sweep through a base and pick off enemies with melee kills. Conversely, if everything starts to go bad, having a pilot on call who can offer air support could turn the tide of a mission going south. Everyone you hire through the game appears to remain on call so you can have them join you out and about. And, of course, the same goes for the Fangs For Hire, which is your list of tamed animals who can offer support, from the always-handy pooch to the scarily effective bear.

But, activate Friends For Hire and you can have a real-world friend join you through he entire campaign. This is also a fantastic way of enhancing the experience. Now you have real control over how you want to approach the game, communicating in more detail, mapping out areas together and splitting up to give you multiple angles on a situation. With so many weapons and vehicles at your disposal and every possible approach available to you in co-op, the potential for causing absolute mayhem with a friend is very high indeed. Just as having the AI can help freshen up a mission, having another player cover your back just feels like a more complete way to play.

A WILD WORLD

The ecosystem of *Far Cry 5* is very impressive. It's been pretty good for some time – and we have to imagine that working on *Far Cry Primal* has really helped to give the development team a better handle on the experience. As a result there's a wonderful use of wildlife in this game. While the Fangs For Hire mechanic (which we discuss elsewhere in this feature) allows you to tame and then call upon a menagerie of animals, giving you some interesting tactical options, meeting animals out in the world can be an interesting challenge.

The presence of bears is probably the most intimidating challenge you have in front of you, although we found the wolverines to be among the most surprising the sometimes terrifying enemies to encounter. They may be small, but like the headcrabs in *Half-Life*, they leap around at pace and can be hard to lock in your crosshairs. Elsewhere there are feisty bulls who won't think twice about charging you, wolves prowling the hillsides, vultures circling in the skies and so much more. And each will not only interact with you, but each other and your enemies. Sometimes walking around this landscape can feel like you're in the midst of an episode of *Planet Earth* with the great David Attenborough.

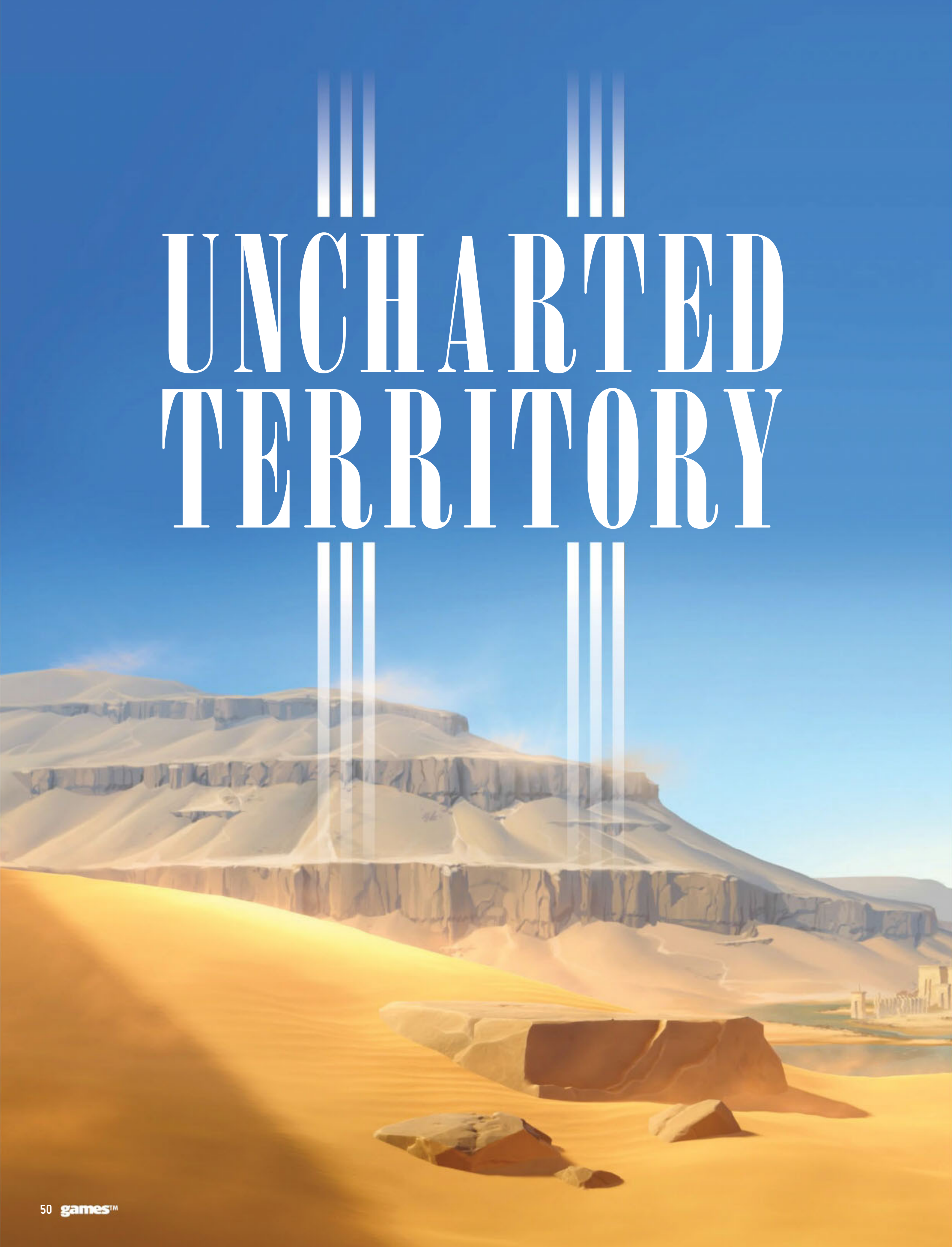
PILLARS IN OUR MIND

One of the simultaneously controversial and popular decisions made by Ubisoft Montreal with regards to changes for the Far Cry series in this release was the dropping of towers and a mini-map in the game. The intention, as the team has explained on multiple occasions, was to make the game feel a little more open and force us, as players, to get a little lost from time to time so we can figure things out for ourselves. As we've experienced it, this is both a success and annoyance in different places. Losing the towers as a means of opening up the map is definitely an improvement, as this is more or less replaced by just talking to the population and taking on missions. That feels much more immersive and organic than before. Meanwhile, in structural terms, the Eden's Gate bases now offer some of the challenge and engagement that these towers would have done before. So, they may not offer the same reward as before, but there are still spots of high-intensity combat and infiltration to get involved with.

The mini-map removal is a little more mixed in its results. Getting from A to B in a large sandbox like this can sometimes be the only thing we're interested in, and having to jump back and forth from the main map to the game in order to place a waypoint to activate our GPS directions (which are themselves a little heavy-handed visually) became a bit of an annoyance. Thus far though, in the balance of things, we'd call the approach a success.



UNCHARTED TERRITORY





WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO FOLLOW A CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED DEBUT SUCH AS FIREWATCH? FOR INDEPENDENT DEVELOPER CAMPO SANTO, IT'S BEEN A JOURNEY ENCUMBERED BY INTERNAL PRESSURES AND FALSE STARTS. WE SPEAK EXCLUSIVELY TO THE STUDIO TO GET THE INSIDE STORY ON **IN THE VALLEY OF GODS**, ONE OF THE MOST EXCITING INDIE GAMES ON THE HORIZON...

Campo Santo is in the business of exploiting the contradictions that exist all around us and exploring them under the guise of interactive entertainment. The inherent happiness and horrors so commonly associated with human nature; the obvious power and secret terror so often found lingering in areas of natural beauty. The studio approached these dichotomies to great effect with its 2016 debut, *Firewatch*. In it, the studio delivered a transfixing narrative adventure as isolating and combative as it was all-encompassing of your attention, taking great pleasure in bending your perception of reality – of forcing you to confront the demons of past indiscretions as they emerge from the long shadows cast from towering trees.

For its second outing, the indie outfit is leaving the lush desolation of Wyoming's Shoshone National Forest behind and heading into a destination far more exotic and no less intoxicating. *In The Valley Of Gods* is an adventure story focused on two women making a movie, at a time in which documentary filmmaking was first being established. It is set in Egypt and inspired by the golden age of Egyptology as an obsession with the nation's ancient past grew; the story driven by a shattered friendship, an enticing mystery and an old film camera.

INTO THE UNKNOWN

In truth, *In The Valley Of Gods* looks and sounds like the natural evolution of the narrative themes and gameplay mechanics that Campo Santo first experimented with in its debut. We said as much to studio co-founder Sean Vanaman, making light of how easy the decision to pursue this project must have been for everybody involved. He did not agree.

"We had no idea what we were doing after *Firewatch*," he says, erupting into laughter, the talkative creative director in good spirits as he spoke exclusively to **games™** on the process of leaving *Firewatch* behind and working towards the release of *In The Valley Of Gods*.

The act of concepting and actually pursuing a second project, as he explains it, is uncharted territory for the 15 staff of the San Francisco-based studio. "We had no experience in doing this. Everyone on this team has worked at places where they either worked for a creative director who had a whole thing planned out or they were on a franchise, which is pretty typical in the games industry – that was the same for all of us."

As an independent studio, Campo couldn't waste time on getting a second game into production. Vanaman and fellow co-founder Jake Rodkin were locked in conversation for weeks, attempting to figure out what the next step would be. The duo is well aware that Campo is sharply



A DIFFERENT KIND OF SPACE

WHY IN THE VALLEY OF GODS IS SACRIFICING AN OPEN WORLD

ONE OF THE really interesting aspects of *Firewatch* was in how its entire world was essentially connected. While the game will never actively push you to go off the beaten track, it is possible to pull out your map and compass and just explore it at will – taking in the beautiful sights at your own pace. Of course, with *In The Valley Of Gods* being set across a sprawling desert and inside crumbling tombs, Campo Santo has had to change its approach to level design and structure.

"This game is going to be structured a little bit different than *Firewatch*," reveals Jane Ng, lead environment and lighting artist at Campo Santo. "*Firewatch* was very much designed to be this contiguous forest – we knew that every space had to be connected. But we aren't married to that idea in this game. We are ready to just be like, okay, *somehow* you travel through this one area, which is much more [detailed] and then it isn't like you have to physically ride a camel for five minutes to get to another spot. I don't know if we've specifically figured out how we are going to do that yet, but we aren't married to the idea of this being a contiguous desert that you are travelling through."

becoming synonymous with first-person narrative adventures – the next game to carry the studio's name would effectively establish its area of expertise in the eyes of many players the world over. While that's an exciting position for a new studio to find itself in, it also carries with it an inherent pressure to deliver on expectations.

"If *Firewatch* is a point on a graph, once we put a second point on that graph we are going to have a line that has a trajectory. If we had turned around and made an RTS, you would have to find some other way to know what the brand of our company is… we weren't worried about being pigeonholed, but at the same time weren't interested in doing something like a *Firewatch* spiritual successor," he continues, describing *Firewatch* as a "very selfish, indulgent game about the place that I'm from," with a chuckle, commenting "and nobody is going to let me make that again."

If that's truly the case, what comes next? Vanaman reveals that this process began with the studio attempting to reflect on its strengths and weaknesses, learning how it can leverage both to fuel a new project. "For us, it ended up coming down to understanding that a lot of our skills are in story, tone and world," Vanaman says, adding, "but we don't necessarily have the experience of doing that with characters."

He isn't wrong. It's easy to overlook such a critical point, but so much of *Firewatch*'s tone was achieved because protagonist Henry was isolated throughout the entirety of the game – his only connection to humanity a voice on the other end of a radio. With *In The Valley Of Gods*, Campo wasn't going to hold interaction at arms length. Instead, it wants to put you in touching distance of another person, it wants to build a meaningful story that has something to say, and it wants to do so around characters and very human interactions. "For us it became all about exploring that. How *does* a studio of our size make a really exciting adventure, and a compelling story, *with* characters? That became *our thing* pretty early on – in deciding that that would be the trajectory of the studio."

Achieving that, it would seem, hasn't been easy. You'll likely recall that *Firewatch* first launched in February of 2016, and so it might surprise you to learn that *In The Valley Of Gods* has only been in active development for little over a year – hence the speculative 2019 release window attached to the game. If you listen to Vanaman tell it, the road to 1920s Egypt is paved with big ambitions and cancelled videogames.

TIME WASTED IS TIME WELL SPENT

Once *Firewatch* shipped, the studio co-founders asked James Benson (animator and game designer) and Aubrey Hesselgren (a gameplay programmer and new hire to the team, previously responsible for the hyper-satisfying parkour systems found in *Brink*) to begin



■ The starring mechanic of *In The Valley Of Gods* will be an old analogue film camera. With it, you'll be able to shoot and piece together your own documentary. The studio wants this to be an expressive experience, effectively replacing the radio of *Firewatch* in terms of player agency.

creating new game concepts, to try and find a mechanical foundation that the studio could build upon for a new game. "Those two dudes just starting making gameplay prototypes for weird games, just going 'here's a mechanic, here's a mechanic, here's a mechanic' and they probably made at least ten of those."

These in turn were turned into animated shorts, in-engine demonstrations within Unity, and shown off around the office. One of these piqued the attention of the entire studio, but you won't see it reflected within *In The Valley Of Gods*. "We actually picked one and started working on a game. We worked on it all the way up through Christmas of 2016 and then… well, we cancelled it," he says, laughing all over again.

Cancelling a project is no laughing matter. At least, it shouldn't be. We've seen game cancellations and setbacks such as this sink large studios in the past, let alone independent outfits running on the cash flow procured after just one release – wasn't Vanaman worried? "We always worry about money – and we are probably going to run out eventually," he says, teasingly, "but *Firewatch* was such a big success for us that we just don't worry about that stuff as much anymore. We are just incredibly lucky, you know? We are very, very fortunate and in a very luxurious position, creatively. Obviously, as I run a company, I worry about it, but there is no better way to ruin a company than to worry about money and to then ship something that we don't totally believe in."

So, what was it about this cancelled project that the team didn't believe in? While Vanaman isn't able to share any work-in-progress images, we were able to get a sense of what the studio was working on for so many months – and an idea of just how far the team cast its net as it attempted to figure out what came next. "It was so mechanic heavy," he says, considerately. "It didn't give everyone in the studio an opportunity to do what they do best. We just couldn't figure out how to blend the strengths of *Firewatch* with something as mechanically heavy as a game like Portal – we just couldn't figure it out."

Vanaman is keen to note that the game – a technically ambitious and complex conceptual project, far from the serene horror and twisting interactive fiction exhibited in its debut – wasn't cancelled because it was veering away from what *Firewatch* established or achieved, but because he didn't believe the studio could do it justice with the resources it had available to it. Vanaman tells a handful of anecdotes of his past, of working within larger studio structures and of finding exciting new projects shelved before their time because they didn't fit with a company's brand or established style; that's a creative trap the veteran designer of Disney Interactive Studios and Telltale Games is eager to steer clear of now he's in a position of control. It's an attitude that is pushing Campo towards bigger and better things.

"You know, I may have been super young and arrogant back then, but I'm still super annoyed by that attitude. I never want to be, like, 'that's not what a Campo Santo game is' and I never want to recreate that environment. That feels really toxic to me; just inherently toxic. I don't know, man… we didn't cancel that game because it didn't feel like a Campo Santo game. We cancelled that game because we didn't know how to make it. Or, at least, we didn't know how to make it good."

"THERE IS NO BETTER WAY TO RUIN A COMPANY THAN TO WORRY ABOUT MONEY AND TO THEN SHIP SOMETHING THAT WE DON'T TOTALLY BELIEVE IN"
SEAN VANAMAN, CAMPO SANTO

"We knew that there were some cool ideas in there but… I find that, if at six months you can't close your eyes and see some sort of version of the game playing in your head, you probably aren't on the right path. I could see the locations, and I could see the mechanic executing, but I couldn't see the harmonious concert of the game coming together. I think everyone felt that way. It was a good test of the studio."

With Christmas 2016 on the horizon, it was ultimately this difficult decision that pushed Campo Santo back to the drawing board and helped incubate *In The Valley Of Gods* towards what we can see of it today; a bold and powerful first-person narrative adventure that's unlike anything else in the genre space.

A CHRISTMAS MIRACLE

"I wanted everybody to go home for that Christmas break in 2016 with an idea that we were all excited about," Vanaman recalls, noting that Benson and Hesselgren were once again tasked with prototyping new mechanics just weeks before the end of the year, only this time they were asked to deliver on a specific question: "What would the all-singing, all-dancing, version of something like *Firewatch* be?"

While this process was ongoing, Campo had set about hiring a new art director to replace the outgoing Olly Moss. They quickly found Claire

"THERE ARE PEOPLE COMING AT US WITH THE 'SJW BULLSHIT'"

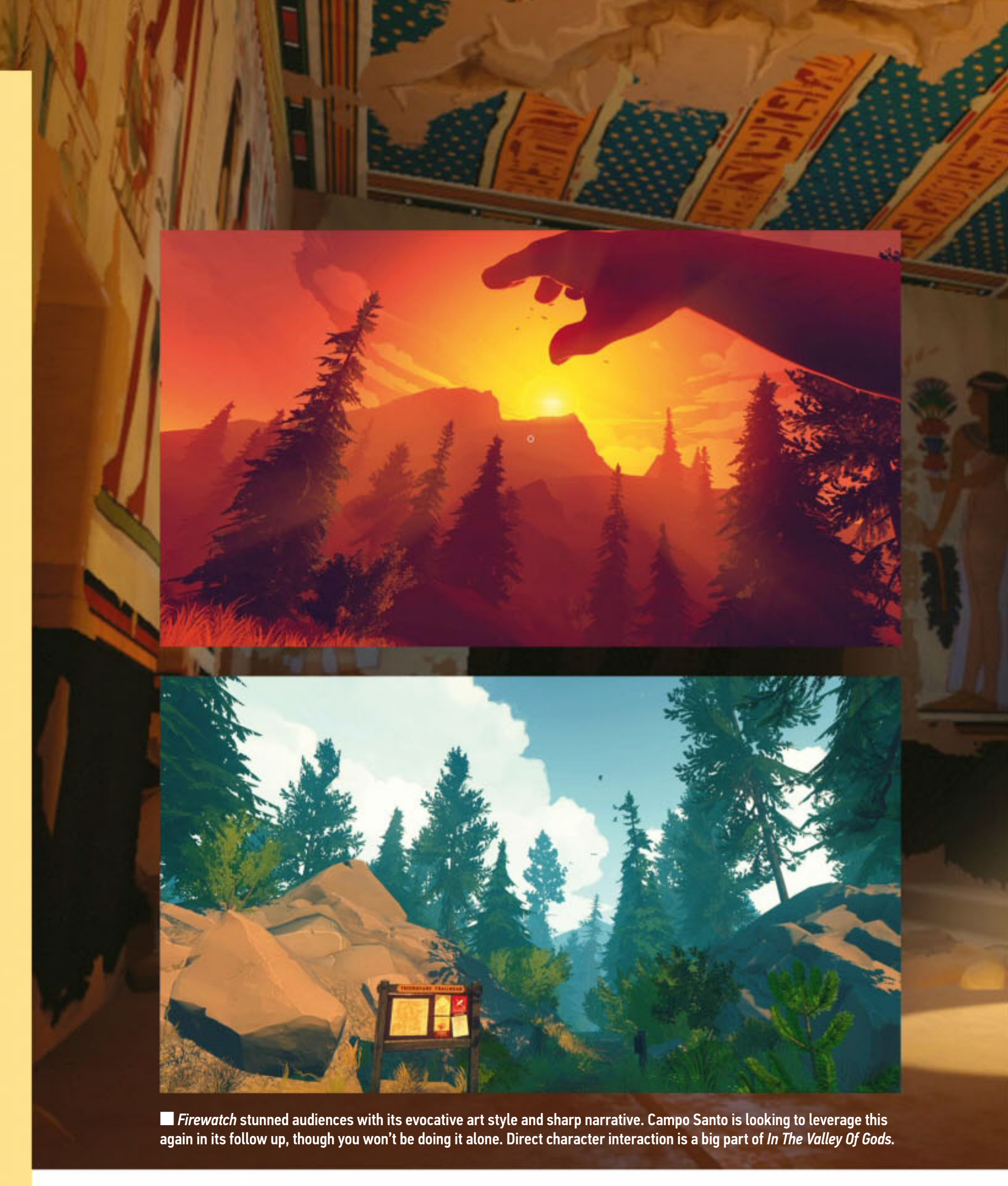
SEAN VANAMAN ON THE MOST PERPLEXING RESPONSE TO IN THE VALLEY OF GODS SO FAR

CAMPO SANTO HAS been largely happy with the response to the debut of *In The Valley Of Gods*, though Vanaman has noted one strange reaction cropping up time and time again. The question of whether Zora and Roshida are "partners" in a romantic or in a platonic sense, and that's something the studio hadn't initially anticipated. "Something that I've found really interesting is that when we showed the trailer, some of the first comments that I saw – and maybe this is coincidence, random and not at all predominant – were people wondering if [Zora and Roshida] were a romantic couple. That's so weird! I mean, obviously, there are people coming at us with the 'SJW bullshit' and being, like, 'Oh you're just going to make a game about minority lesbians?' And I'm just like… *what*!?"

"First off, if you want to make that game you should make that game – nobody should feel precluded from making that game if it's in their heart and are willing to go through the hell of making a videogame to do it. But I didn't watch the trailer for Uncharted and wonder if Nate and Sully were going to fuck," he says, erupting into laughter as he does. "Like nobody did and nobody does… it's just gender bias, and it's very strange."

"This is a story about friendships and the friendships that are forged between people who need each other. It's definitely an exploration of that; of thinking about the people that you need, not just the people that you choose to be with," he says, noting that the gender of the characters absolutely matter here. The landscape of equality was completely different in 1928, and that's something that will always be on the periphery of this adventure as the intrepid duo set out to capture an epic discovery on film before their all-male rivals get a chance to.

"The social facts of the era are definitely a part of the story. I think it would be pretty irresponsible of us to just present these two utopian characters who just happened be successful, and then this is just some alternate history where them being women didn't matter? Like, no. Them being women matters. These are unmarried women in the Twenties, who are in their late Twenties/early Thirties," he considers, noting how society likely would have expected these women to have been married and caring for children, not off exploring the world and making movies. "So that stuff obviously matters to them because it matters to the world that they are in. They share that together. The story explores that and I want people to maybe have feelings about friendships and relationships… not a lot of people tell stories or make games about female friendship – and not to say people don't, because there are lots of good examples – but it's just not something that gets explored a lot."



***Firewatch* stunned audiences with its evocative art style and sharp narrative. Campo Santo is looking to leverage this again in its follow up, though you won't be doing it alone. Direct character interaction is a big part of *In The Valley Of Gods*.**

Hummel, an industry veteran who has worked on the likes of *Fable Legends*, *Sunset Overdrive*, and *BioShock Infinite* – another artist with a luscious and immediately iconic art style. And it was hidden in the depths of Hummel's portfolio, Vanaman tells us, where the inspiration for *In The Valley Of Gods* would be unearthed. "I was looking through Claire's portfolio and I found this 1920s Egyptian illustrated piece [It's called *1923* and you should look it up online immediately as it's very cool] and I was like, 'Oh, that's super interesting!'"

The piece in unquestionably beautiful – mesmerising and evocative, much like *In The Valley Of Gods* is today. It's exciting and energetic, playfully suggestive of an adventure to be had and world to be explored just beyond the panels of the frame. As a starting point for a new game, they don't come much better.

Hummel will tell us that much of this stems from her love of the era and the golden age of Egyptology that rose out of it – she's a self-confessed "nerd of ancient Egypt and its history". Vanaman, on the other hand, will describe her work ethic and attention to detail a little differently: "There's something about the way that Claire sees, understands, and has genuine intellectual curiosity about the human beings that lived in ancient Egypt. Not the mystical aspects of ancient Egypt, but the real people. You know, they had some real shit going on," he laughs, noting that discussion quickly started to snowball internally after Claire explained the piece in detail. "It was the mood of it that interested us, and then the mood led to the discussion of the people, and then things started to fit slowly but surely."

Vanaman tells us that this discovery led to a week of heavy research, of attempting to discover not only if the studio was capable of creating a game heavily rooted in ancient Egyptian imagery, but of whether the team felt as if it had something to say on it. "We're in a pretty luxurious place as creators, where we can



■ Set in 1928, *In The Valley Of Gods* takes place during the golden age of Egyptology, a time of great cultural significance. The opportunities for wealth and fame are huge during this time, and the race is on to capture new discoveries before anybody else.

just say, 'So, what interests us?' Oh, that thing? Alright, lets go and see if there's anything there."

Clearly, there was. Within a week it was all starting to come together. A game starring two women in the 1920s, a character-driven adventure that avoided the pulpy pitfalls that tend to plague media set in this period of time and history. "We all really like adventure stories – in the Indiana Jones sense, not adventure in the LucasArts sense – but we always kind of lament their instinct to descend into violence," says Vanaman, noting that the team always returned to the same question throughout this process: "Can we create something that doesn't do that? What do we have to say in that genre – do we even have anything to say in that genre? We started kicking it around… and as it turns out, we did!"

"Often times, developers kind of figure out a reason to get the characters to kill other people in a videogames. Whereas for us, with the stuff that we make, we want the mechanic to be tied to the character's purpose, and I know that sounds really obvious but it's not really," laughs Vanaman, calling back to how intrinsically tied the starring dialogue mechanic in *Firewatch* was to the radio, to Henry, and to his job as an isolated park ranger. "Once we started thinking about who the characters would be, everything then just evolved from there."

"WE HAVE A LOT OF HOPES AND AMBITIONS FOR THE CAMERA, WE WANT IT TO BE REALLY EXPRESSIVE IN THE GAME"
SEAN VANAMAN, CAMPO SANTO

Of course, Vanaman is acutely aware that Campo doesn't have free reign to do whatever it wants. Even after the release of a critically lauded, award-winning videogame such as *Firewatch*, there is still an audience to serve and there are still boundaries the studio knows it needs to work within as a creator of interactive entertainment. "So much of that first year had been focused on us being really inward looking. We didn't really have that luxury with *Firewatch*, we had to be really inward looking and outward facing at *all times*. We were just so worried that nobody knew who we were, because nobody did," he says, although he's certain that little has changed in the time since. "And that's still the case; even if you sell a couple million copies of your game, it's like *oh, congrats*, 1.5 per cent of Steam bought it, you know," laughing again. We're certain this is part humble brag, part honest reflection and, you know what, we're totally on board with it.

"Somebody reading this right now will not only never have heard of me or of *In The Valley Of Gods*, but this will also end up being their introduction to *Firewatch*. It is crazy, but we always have to keep that in mind," he continues, not that this observation will ever be a deterrent to their relatively open creative process. "You know, we know that our job is to make it a compelling and exciting entertainment project. That even the people who don't give a damn about these characters, this era, of even this



IN CONVERSATION WITH THE ARTISTS BEHIND IN THE VALLEY OF GODS

ART DIRECTOR CLAIRE HUMMEL AND ENVIRONMENTAL/LIGHTING ARTIST JANE NG DISCUSS THEIR NEW PARTNERSHIP AND THEIR FIRST STEPS INTO IN THE VALLEY OF GODS

What are you personally responsible for at Campo Santo?
Claire Hummel: I am the art director at the studio, and we're so small that I'm also the only concept artist. I'm the only person doing 2D art for the game – so that's concept art, storyboards, tone pieces, and style guides – and then I hand it off to Jane to turn it into something manageable.

Jane Ng: My job, primarily, is to make whatever Claire wishes [laughter], to materialise it in the game as a space that you can actually have a player explore. I work a lot with Claire and Jake Rodkin, who's been doing a lot of our level design. The workflow usually is Claire coming up with something cool and will then work with Jake to make a grey box space. Once everyone is pretty happy with the concept art and the very blocky 3D space I will take it and make it as close to the concept art in 3D as possible.

Are you excited to be leaving the national reserve behind for an all-new location?
Claire: I think Jane was at least somewhat excited to be going to a completely new location…

Jane: There are no more trees! It's funny, coming out of *Firewatch* – and before we settled on making a game in Egypt – everybody had a little wish list of things we maybe wanted to do the next time around. My one wish was for us to have a space where we could maybe have a wall without any windows [laughter]. Because every space in *Firewatch* is super open, even if you're in the tower you can still see outside of it – there are no real interior spaces, and that creates a lot of technical challenges. Having a lot of ruins and tombs will satisfy that wish… and in addition to that there will be very few trees, if any [laughter].

Claire: We'll have one tree but it'll be a *really* good tree!

Jane: I don't mind making one really gorgeous tree, so long as there's only one of them!

Is it challenging to bring life to a locale that's fairly devoid of it?
Claire: Our VFX guy, Matt Wilde, is immensely helpful in bringing any amount of dynamism to these scenes. Because, if you look at any video of the desert, there's a surprising amount of motion in how sand moves across dunes, or how birds fly by, or even the flicker of the lighter flame in the trailer. It really helps having a character on screen, it really helps us activate those spaces – suddenly, there's somebody else that has agency in the ruin that you're exploring, looking at their own things and moving light around the scenes.

Jane: I think it's actually going to be really fun, because the big difference with *In The Valley Of Gods* is that you have Zora as your companion. I think being in a desert, or in an environment more devoid of life, can be used to great effect to highlight your interactions with Zora – because she's the only other living thing, and everything else is really huge scale. I think it will give us the ability to focus on things that are more human scale. We didn't get to do much of that in *Firewatch*; so much of it was focused on Henry, and being in his internal mind, and of course, the forest.

What has been the biggest artistic inspiration for you on *In The Valley Of Gods*?
Claire: We wanted to be aware of things like Indiana Jones and other pulpy exploration media, but part of our thinking with the game was to do an Indiana Jones that isn't about shooting guns, or stealing artefacts. It's much more character based and really based in that setting. It's about respecting those spaces and not trying to steal all of its things and trying to put them in the British Museum.

Jane: I would say *Lawrence Of Arabia* would be the thing that we have looked at the most.

Was it intimidating replacing Olly Moss as art director?
Claire: I'm a huge fan of Olly's work and it's actually been lovely getting to know him since starting work at Campo. I met him at GDC and was a total nerd about it. I love his work… I'd be lying if I said I didn't take this job like, 'Oh my God,' because there are very big shoes to fill, to really set a style and vision for this game that stands on its own, that people are most definitely going to compare to *Firewatch* for better or for worse.

I've just never been in this position where I got to make a game and be entirely left up to my own devices – where I have to trust all of my instincts. It took some time to settle into the role; early concept art you can see me struggling against previous jobs that I've had, I think – the last job I've had was a *WestWorld* VR game for HBO which was *so* photo-realistic and *so* straightforward. I've had to allow myself to push into weird colour spaces and trust those instincts, and it's definitely been a challenge. It's something I think about all the time.

Jane: And also because we haven't worked together before, I think it took a little time for you to get that, like, no, no, no; even if you make it super weird, I will still try to make it happen. Or I'll tell you, 'Oh Claire, I can't even make this.' Actually, I don't feel like I've ever asked you to change anything because I couldn't make it work.

Claire: This has been a great working relationship! I feel very lucky to have Jane backing me up.

Jane: It's been interesting, actually. Seeing people say that this is looking like 'a very Campo game'. I don't know that a lot of people really know that we have a very different art direction this time, but it's interesting to see that people still think that it looks like a Campo game, which is good! We don't actively try to stay on brand or anything, in terms of visuals, so I'm glad it came through.



Starring characters Zora and Rashida are combatative allies, former friends that have reunited under duress to complete this one final film in an effort to reclaim their fame and fortune.

genre, will also like and enjoy it. That becomes the next question for us – can we even do that? Because it [*In The Valley Of Gods*] can't just be our self indulgent meditation on documentary film making in the 1920s."

INSIDE IN THE VALLEY OF GODS

"We have such a long lead on this game. This has been the most fun I've ever had working on a game, but under the hood it's the most technically ambitious. We've built so many tools [and] we've had to retool the whole studio around making this game," he tells us, and we get the impression that none of that is mere bravado.

Okay, well maybe a little bit of it is – but with career credits that include writing and directing the most poignant episodes of Telltale's *The Walking Dead: Season One*, Vanaman has earned himself a pass in our eyes. Besides, *In The Valley Of Gods* is still really early in development. Like, *really* early. Honestly, we were a little surprised that the studio agreed to speak with us to begin with. Vanaman is earnest in his admission that he doesn't know how much he should give away. That's partly due to the shifting nature of game design and the difficulties often associated with mechanic and system implementation; it's also partly because there are certain questions that the studio hasn't answered for itself yet – let alone for fans eager for as much information on the project as possible. "I don't know why we haven't done much press on this one yet," laughs Vanaman, keenly aware that precious little has been revealed about the game, its story, or characters publicly since its reveal at Geoff Keighley's 2017 Game Awards showcase. "Maybe we are just getting better at our jobs?"

If this *is* going to be the only press Campo plans on doing for a long while, you better believe we wanted to squeeze as much information out of Vanaman as we could. He was keen to stress how important the characters and story were to the studio. That being the case, lets get into it: *In The Valley Of Gods* is set in 1928 across Egypt, with the areas designed to house this adventure being fictional but heavily inspired by the very real tombs found in the famed Valley Of Kings – home to such royalty as Tutankhamun and his infamous KV62 chamber. The starring women Rashida (the player character) and Zora (the character that can be seen on screen in the trailer) are explorer-filmmakers – contemporaries of Robert Flaherty, the creative mind behind the infamous 1922 documentary *Nanook Of The North* – on location shooting a documentary of their own, a format and idea that was only just beginning to be explored and solidified across the world.

"Rashida and Zora are brought together as these two young, talented women in the earlier Twenties by a financier – like a rich patron – who is into moving pictures. And, on a lark, writes them a cheque to make a movie about real life," notes Vanaman, who is quick to mention that, at the time, movie making was all about "silent stories and pantomime adventures" rather than opportunities to "go out into the world and film real stuff".

"They make a movie that's a worldwide hit and then over the course of about seven to eight years, they are able to get more financing, to make more movies, but their careers slowly decline – bomb after bomb after bomb," he reveals, explaining that this is where *In The Valley Of Gods* truly begins. Their professional relationship is in tatters and their friendship in ruins, the pair's original financer approaches them with an offer – a hot tip on an exciting archaeological excavation – that is too good to refuse. It's the opportunity to reclaim their fame and fortune by making a remarkable discovery. "The story is about them being on the hunt for where this archaeological discovery is about to be made, while also acting as a rehashing and a re-litigating of their relationship and their baggage."

That's the setup, but what of the core mechanic? Campo gave but a hint of it in the reveal. "We put the mechanic in the box and knew that, by the end of the trailer, we were going to reveal it and show you what it is." Vanaman is of course referring to the gorgeous analogue film camera that is being carefully transported throughout the tomb in the tattered briefcase – hastily assembled as the sun breaks across the horizon.

"We have a lot of hopes and ambitions for the camera, we want it to be really expressive in the game; not just as a key that unlocks quests but as a… I don't know how to put it, collaborative storytelling tool I guess," Vanaman continues, and it certainly sounds exciting. *In The Valley Of Gods* is about filmmaking and friendship as much as it is anything else, and the hope from Campo is that players will have free reign and total autonomy in setting out on creating this film. "It's going to be super expressive. You can film and record anything in the game, review your footage… all of this stuff will matter; the player is choosing what to film and the game will be paying attention, the characters will talk about the things that you film, for example, even if you are filming stuff that's not just the main quest," he says, also teasing that the game will react accordingly to where you rest the lens of the camera, with one of the goals to have AI of the world act differently as it becomes the focus of your attention.

In The Valley Of Gods is an interesting prospect; a first-person narrative adventure about exploration and adventure; friendship and filmmaking. Campo Santo is leveraging its talents in storytelling and traversal to create something different, the question now remains about how well the team can pull it all together. With the mechanical emphasis on shooting the documentary and the thrust of the story focused on rebuilding relationships – not to mention the struggles of female adventurers and filmmakers encroaching upon a cultural world run by men – the balance between each of these moving parts is *everything*.

> "THIS HAS BEEN THE MOST FUN I'VE EVER HAD WORKING ON A GAME, BUT UNDER THE HOOD, IT'S THE MOST TECHNICALLY AMBITIOUS"
> **SEAN VANAMAN, CAMPO SANTO**

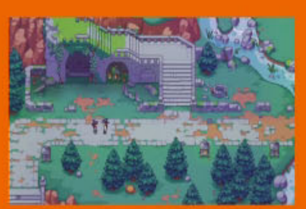
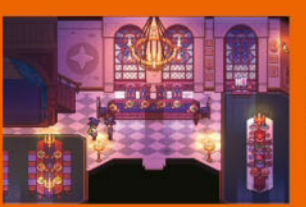
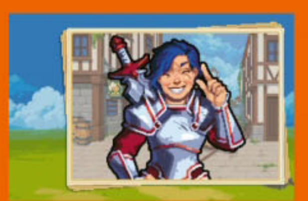
"We are trying to figure out the vector between what is mechanically interesting – like, say, limiting the film or only having so much that you can shoot (so that you can make these mutually exclusive choices) – alongside working out what is actually fun, and what allows you to best experience this really rich story. Honestly, we really don't know the answer to that yet."

"This time we are trying to be a little more iterative as we are building the game; proofing out all of the little prototypes, all of the little tools and all the tech that we've built over the last year," says Vanaman, teasing that the studio is actually right in the middle of building a giant opening set-piece, the scale of which far exceeds anything it has attempted in the past. This, we're told, is a big test for the studio; if this piece of the puzzle falls into place, everything will come together from here.

"Can we even hit that right tone?" adds Vanaman. "When the game is running at 100mph – in terms of the action, pace, and the things that these characters care about – you know, what will it even be like to wield this camera? We are kind of like figuring it all out now. Our approach is much more iterative now because we are more confident in ourselves as creators – whereas we just never believed that about ourselves during *Firewatch*'s development. We might not have all of the answers now, but we believe that we know how to find them this time."

WHAT'S NEXT FOR Chucklefi



AFTER THE HUGE SUCCESS OF STARDEW VALLEY AND THE ANTICIPATION SWIRLING AROUND WARGROOVE AND PROJECT SPELLBOUND, **games™** EXPLORES WHAT'S NEXT FOR DEVELOPER/PUBLISHER CHUCKLEFISH - ONE OF THE MOST EXCITING BRITISH OUTFITS IN THE GAMING INDUSTRY

Chucklefish CEO and designer Finn Brice is contemplating the "beginning of a pushback," as we start discussing gaming culture, and the way that Chucklefish has been offering something nicer, lighter, more *wholesome* to gamers since its inception in 2011. "People want to reclaim games as something fun, something nice, something to connect with."

"The response to our titles seems like a direct contrast to all the cynicism around [games] media out there at the moment," continues Jay Baylis, artist at the studio. "There has almost become a wholesome culture that's cropped up around our games. Around *Stardew Valley* particularly, you've got this community that's intentionally trying to be lovely and friendly and helpful to reflect the values of our game. It's something that's clear on the Switch too – it's a fun, family console where people want to help and play with each other. There's a tangible demand for that wholesomeness."

It's not just true of gaming: on the internet as a whole, you're starting to see a pushback against toxicity and a palpable shift towards the pleasant, the nutritive, the ethical. There are meme pages focused on positivity, movements based around supporting one another versus tearing each other down – and entire communities built around education and encouragement starting to find their feet in 2018. Chucklefish represents that in gaming, and it's wonderful.

Looking around the Chucklefish studio, it's hard to imagine anyone getting irate or frustrated in this environment. Nestled on the ground floor of a Canary Wharf office building, Chucklefish is an oasis of relaxed creativity, a massive contrast to the rest of the business district. No-one wears a suit. There are chibi-styled portraits of the staff on the walls. A dog happily lollops around the studio. You could, in fact, imagine the Chucklefish office existing in one of its own games.

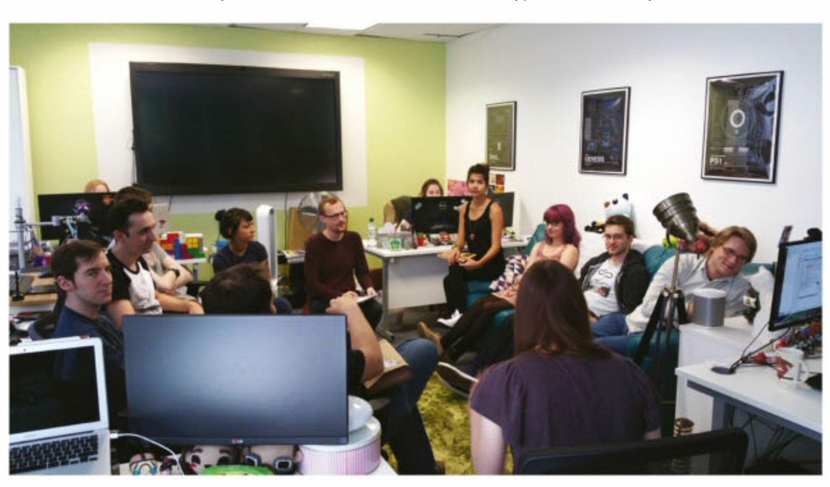
It never used to be like this: once upon a time (well, seven years ago), Chucklefish Games was a remote outfit: a group of like-minded developers working together from their home countries around the world. Brice scouted out an office space when the publisher really began to start motoring, and the staff gravitated to it.

"We're friends as well as colleagues," Brice explains. "We spend a lot of time together outside of work, and we're all very relaxed around each other. When you're doing something creative, that really helps: people feel that they can express themselves more, there's less pressure. You can put your stupid ideas out there and instead of being shot down, people might actually be like, 'Hang on, that's *great*.'"

That almost familial feeling is evident in the company as soon as you witness how they interact. During our time with the studio, conversations often went off the rails – from talking about the complexities of representing romance in video games to the intricacies of *Lord Of The Rings* plot holes, Yoda doing back flips in the *Star Wars* prequels, to Baylis' deep-rooted aversion to all things sports, you can tell the 17-strong London studio has a solid connection all built on a permeating passion for gaming.

Chucklefish is a flat company: there's no hierarchy, and when the studio comes round to creating a new title, it holds a week-long pitching session where anyone – creative, business, coding – can throw their ideas out to the team. This organic, cultural process leads Chucklefish to the projects that everyone feels most comfortable making. That's how the studio ended up with both *WarGroove* and *Project SpellBound* on the cards.

Chucklefish's next project, *WarGroove*, is a tactical RPG that's heavily inspired by Nintendo's GBA classic *Advance Wars*. From the gameplay to the art style, it's brimming with this aesthetic that we can only describe as 'western Nintendo': each of the game's 12 commanders has their own portrait that manages to communicate so much personality in how they're composed, and each unit type is wonderfully animated with a »





gorgeous, fluid pixel art style that has come to be synonymous with Chucklefish. "We are inspired by Nintendo," explains Brice. "There's something about Nintendo games that are easy to access, that anyone can pick up and play, and that influences how we make our games, too."

Even in the smallest parts of *WarGroove*, you can see how that friendly, readable style that Nintendo perfected in the early days of console games managed to get into the DNA of *Chucklefish*. In the map editor, dropping a unit into the world sees a satisfying thud and plume of dust come up, and the cursor is a big ol' white gloved hand. All the information you need is presented to you via a clean, scannable UI. It's all the best parts of what makes classic Nintendo games tick, modernised and repackaged.

Of course, *WarGroove* is a departure from Chucklefish-developed *Starbound* and Chucklefish-published *Stardew Valley*. *WarGroove* is the spiritual successor to *Advance Wars*, basically, but processed in a more cartoony way, where quality-of-life improvements abound. But the studio isn't just leaning on old designs – from our brief hands-on with the game, we've seen that it's ambitious in its attempts to modernise the experience for a new audience. There are even plans to ship the game with a mode that lets players take turns against each other online, chess-style, for gamers that can't always be online with their friends at the same time.

This time around, the focus is much more on action and skirmishing, trading resources for units and leading your troops to glory on the 2D battlefield. There's no romance in the version of the game that will launch – though each of the 12 commanders does have their own campaign story you can play through in single-player with branching narratives, for those into Chucklefish's bright and uplifting kind of storytelling.

"People have asked us if there's romance stuff in the game," laughs Baylis, "but there's none of that here… though that said, there is a campaign editor in the title, and there are character portraits so…"

"There *will* be mods" adds Molly Carroll, community and marketing manager, laughing.

For those more interested in exploring the labyrinthine world of computer game romances, Chucklefish's other internal project might be more up your street: referred to as *Project Spellbound*, the next game is basically Harry Potter meets *Stardew Valley*. Set in a wizarding school where you learn the ins and outs of low-level magic, the game is more focused on creating a world you can truly believe in than giving you a world-ending calamity to prevent.

Having learned from *Stardew Valley*, Chucklefish is making the world of *Project Spellbound* a priority: the team is throwing everything into the idea of this being a school. Things aren't going to go the way you want first time. You're going to make embarrassing mistakes. You're going to mess up. You're going to lose friends, alienate people, learn things the hard way. It all sounds a little like John Green wrote a Harry Potter fanfiction, and it's incredible.

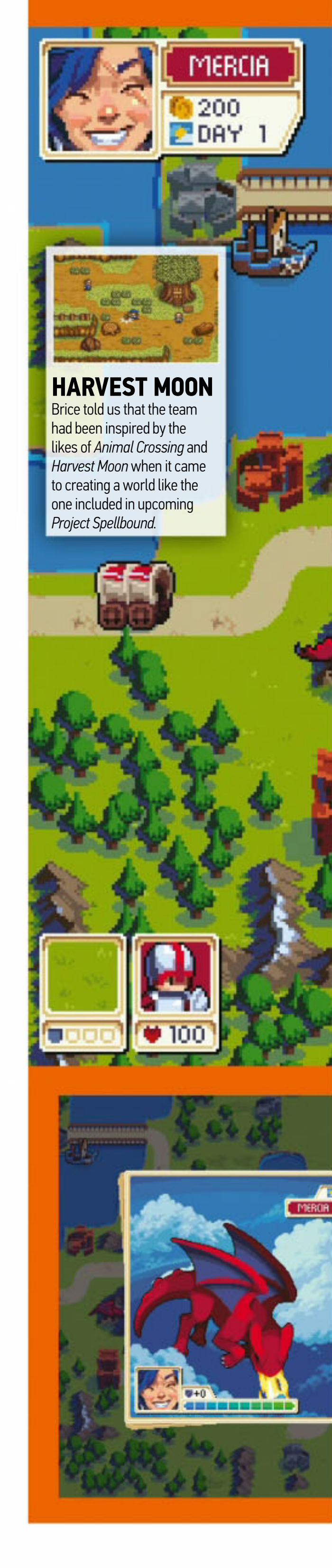
"A lot of games with romance options are very forgiving," Brice explains. "We're not going for that. Things are going to go wrong, and we don't want you to have to reset the game to stop that from happening. We want that to be a feature. We want this to feel real, we want our players to understand how the characters in this game actually think and feel, and then they can react to that."

Carroll explains that a lot of work has gone into the characters in *Project Spellbound* – Chucklefish knows that it's got the pixel art setup of its world down (both *Starbound* and *Stardew Valley* have been repeatedly praised for the way the art elicits such a distinct sense of place), but with *Spellbound* the studio is really doubling down on characters. "We've given all the characters in *Project Spellbound* personality tests!" explains Carroll, "it's actually unnerving how much we know about them." The rest of the assembled studio staffers laugh at this, before Brice follows up Carroll's comments. "But that's what we're trying to do: we're trying to make these real characters with real motivations in a real world, and we want people to connect with that. We're all very proud of what we create, and we want our players to share in that, live in our school for a little while."

So where can Chucklefish go next? After the runaway success of *Stardew Valley*, the studio was very much thrust into the mainstream. With *WarGroove* due to drop in spring 2018 and *Project Spellbound* pending a formal announcement and release window, the studio has a busy 2018 ahead… but Brice is keen to make sure the indie outfit never takes its eye off that wholesome outlook it's championed for the past seven years.

"We don't have the same kind of trajectory as your average studio – so we're not looking to get bigger and bigger and bigger until we're triple-A level. We're almost a lifestyle business, to some extent… we just make the games we want to make. Our games and projects are getting much better, we're honing our craft, we learn from each one, and in five years' time the goal will be to be making games we love. And that makes us happy."

Brice explains that he personally would like to work on something 'real time competitive' (and he already has some ideas!) but the general consensus from Chucklefish is that there is no genre they'd rule out. "If anything, we want to make a difference to the game's industry – we want to make people happy."

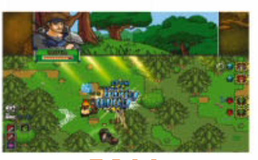


HARVEST MOON
Brice told us that the team had been inspired by the likes of *Animal Crossing* and *Harvest Moon* when it came to creating a world like the one included in upcoming *Project Spellbound*.



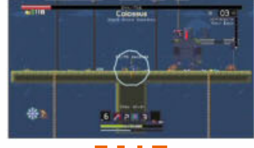
THE STORY SO FAR?

CHUCKLEFISH ACTS AS BOTH A DEVELOPER AND A PUBLISHER. HERE'S WHAT IT'S PUT OUT SO FAR





2011
WANDERLUST: REBIRTH
DEVELOPER: Yeti Trunk





2013
RISK OF RAIN
DEVELOPER: Hoppo Games



2014
HALFWAY
DEVELOPER: Robotality



2015
INTERSTELLARIA
DEVELOPER: Coldrice Games

INFLUENCES

THE GAMES THAT ARE INSPIRING THE FUTURE OF CHUCKLEFISH

OVERWATCH

Though plans for a future competitive action game are vague, the team at Chucklefish noted that they played a lot of *Overwatch*, and seemed to enjoy the seasonal modes like Lucioball quite a lot, too.

FIRE EMBLEM

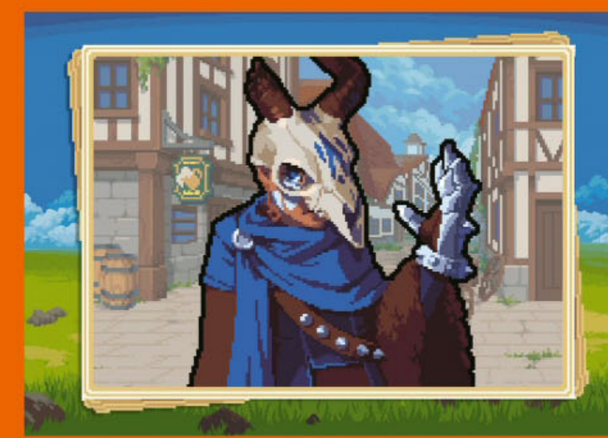
Artist Jay Baylis told us that the relationship between characters in *Fire Emblem* had been something the team often talked about, even if there isn't a romance mechanic in the final build.

ADVANCE WARS

Advance Wars has clearly inspired the upcoming *WarGroove*, with its tactical-RPG elements and focus on factions and their units.



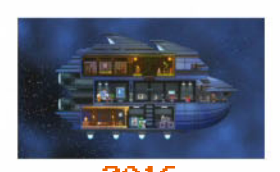








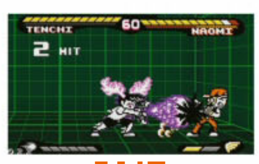
2015
WANDERLUST ADVENTURES
DEVELOPER: Yeti Trunk



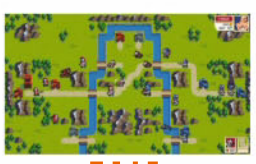
2016
STARBOUND
DEVELOPER: Chucklefish



2016
STARDEW VALLEY
DEVELOPER: ConcernedApe



2017
POCKET RUMBLE
DEVELOPER: Cardboard Robot Games



2018
WARGROOVE
DEVELOPER: Chucklefish

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Reviews



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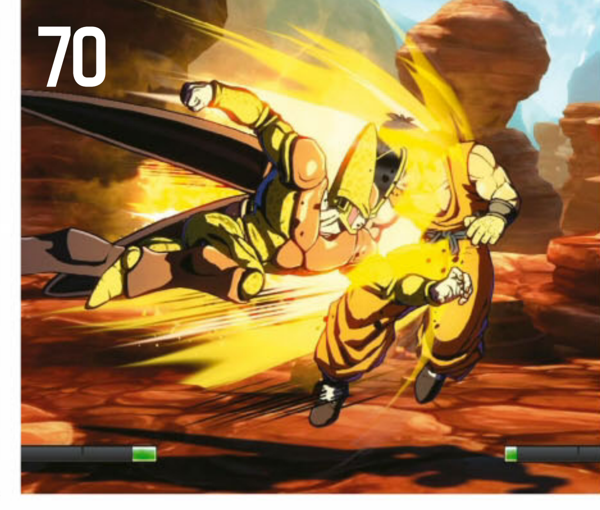
MONSTER HUNTER: WORLD

Capcom has retooled its epic action-RPG series for Western audiences and finally brought it back home to console, but has it been worth the wait?



THE AVERAGE

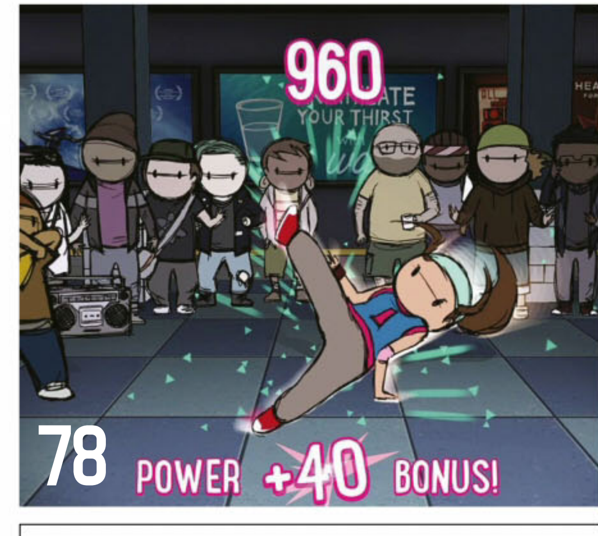
Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven and, of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** review videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest. We'd never let that happen, and besides, you'd smell it a mile off. Finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact. They are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists designed to enlighten, inform and engage – the gospel according to **games™**.

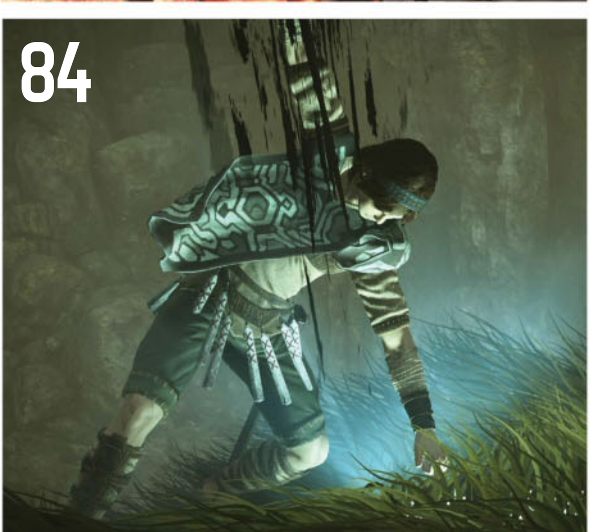












AGREE/DISAGREE?

games™ is always right, but that doesn't stop some people disagreeing. Think we've got a review horribly wrong? Or did we nail it?

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FANTASTIC BEASTS AND WHERE TO MAIM THEM

Monster Hunter: World

For all of Capcom's talk of improved accessibility, *Monster Hunter: World* is still something of a force unto itself. For the uninitiated, it can so often feel like a perplexing action-RPG that seems to take great pride in flittering haphazardly between delivering uninhibited fun and smashing you over the head with its unassailable grind. For veteran hunters, this is an entry to the series that you've likely long dreamed of playing, as Monster Hunter finally leaves the handheld platform behind in favour of a supercharged edition designed specifically for play on home console.

The execution of this shift back to console is long overdue, and is in many respects a glorious overhaul of one of the most underappreciated game series on the market. Monster Hunter is still a unique prospect; its blend of skill-based combat, time-decimating cycle of guiltless animal slaughter, and absurd loot generation as gratifying as it is difficult to walk away from. Well, for the most part anyway.

On the surface of it, Capcom has taken steps to streamline many of Monster Hunter's most impenetrable systems. The camera and controls have been overhauled, making *World* immediately feel far more inviting than its handheld counterparts; the core mechanics explained in such a way that they no longer require a trove of online information to quickly get a grasp (let alone a deep understanding) of, while the core loop has been made relatively clear from the outset of your adventure across the new world thanks to the implementation of a fairly rote campaign. These changes represent a serious attempt to make the series appeal to players outside of Japan – to those that have been kept at an arm's length by the series' notorious difficulty and almost impressive lack of transparency. What we're trying to say is that this is a revamp made in earnest, even if it isn't always successful in its attempts to welcome new hunters into the fold while simultaneously attempting to appease seasoned veterans.

While none of these changes work to dull the magic of Monster Hunter, there's still an overbearing sense that Capcom hasn't gone far enough in some of its attempts to bring the series into the modern era. That isn't because we're in search of something that's easier or less involved, but because there is so much going on in *World* that its various moving parts can feel strangely bewildering, empowering and overwhelming all at the same time. *World* is quite unlike any other action-RPG out there, and Capcom fails to make much concession to that.

While the central premise is easy enough to grasp a hold of, that of hunting and killing giant monsters in lush open areas – an exciting prospect, given the gargantuan size and stunning detail attributed to each and every one of these creatures – this promise does come with certain points of contention attached with it. Namely, Monster Hunter works around a very tight gameplay loop, and your traction with *World* will likely live or die by how deeply it sinks its claws into you through its opening hours.

This stems from the fact that you don't level up your character, not in the traditional sense. Instead you're left to gather 'resources' from the monsters that you hunt, kill and capture; the skin and bones of these creatures repurposed to craft new weapons and armour, which in turn lets you track and take on even more powerful enemies out in the world. The gameplay loop is found in the hunting and gathering, in the constant recycle of boss fights and repurposing of their body parts for fashionable new outfits. Oh, and when we say 'loop', we do of course mean *grind*.

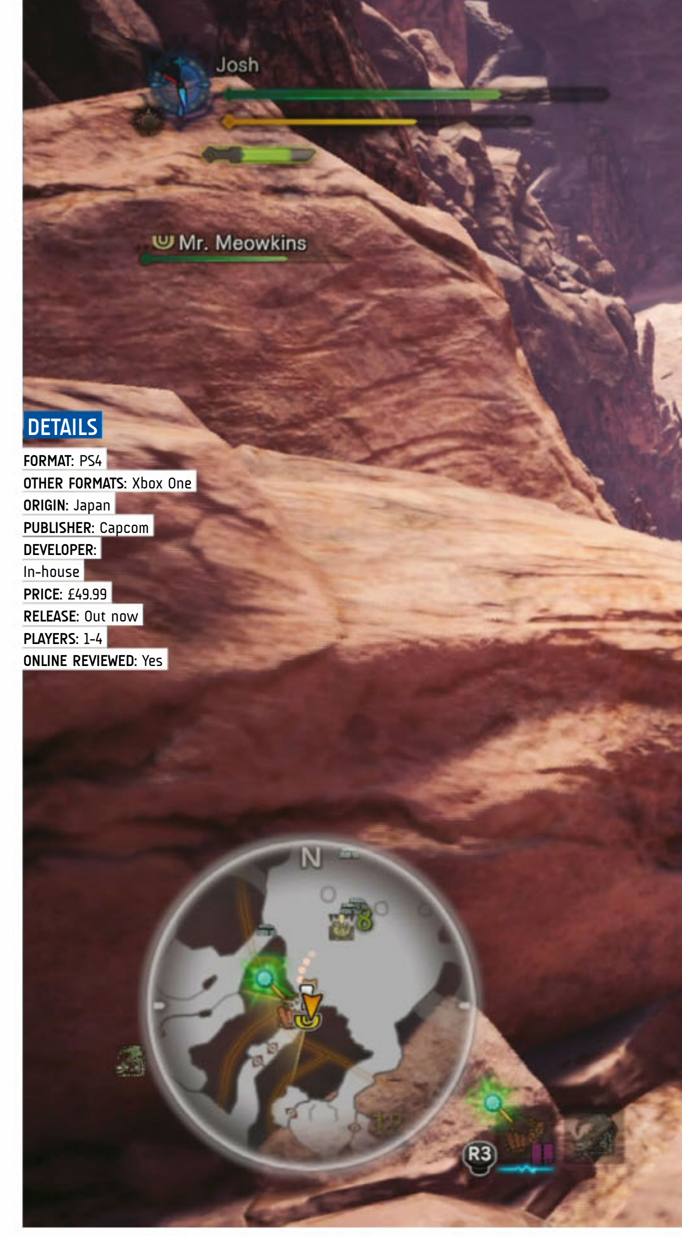
If you aren't into repeating this cycle ad nauseam – embracing it for 40-plus hours before the game even begins to reveal its most fantastic beasts and areas to hunt them in – you will find little in the way of a hook into Monster Hunter's frequently haphazard action. If you had any intention of simply dropping into *World* and fighting a few monsters with up to four of your buddies as a bit of throwaway fun, Monster Hunter isn't going to be the game for you. And that's okay, you don't have to be into every big triple-A, but it's easy enough to get fooled into thinking *World* is a traditional action game by way of the trailers and promotional materials.

It's interesting in that *World* is such a divisive product by its very nature, and yet it still finds the space to be engaging should you be willing to sacrifice enough of your time and patience to it. When all of its various parts coalesce into one substantive whole, it's quite a pure delight.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

LARGE SCALE: The introduction of various open-world biomes makes this feel like the biggest and most varied Monster Hunter game ever made.



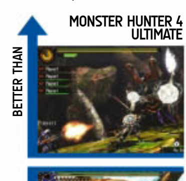
Above: Most of the battles with the starring monsters and exciting and invigorating, though some do get a little tedious as the same attack patterns and flee routines begin to present themselves.

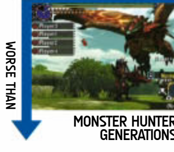
DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Capcom
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

MONSTER HUNTER 4 ULTIMATE





WORSE THAN

MONSTER HUNTER GENERATIONS



Above: It's tough to not feel a pang of guilt as monsters begin to limp away from you, whimpering and stumbling as they attempt to escape your brutal assaults.

THE BATTLES CAN BE INTENSE AND BREATHTAKING, THOUGH THEY CAN ALSO BE LONG AND FRUSTRATING



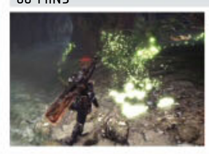
ONLINE MULTIPLAYER

While the success of Monster Hunter in Japan can be largely attributed to the popularity of its local multiplayer across the handheld iterations, Capcom has opted to push the focus onto online multiplayer for *World*. When it works it's truly fantastic; just about every quest can be played with up to three friends or randomers by your side, with the monsters scaling in difficulty with the introduction of other players. We say 'when it works' because *World* has problems when it comes to its online play. Matchmaking is slow to work and patchy at best, while playing with friends requires a convoluted process of jumping through hoops to work. It's a start, but more work should have been done to further streamline online multiplayer.

TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

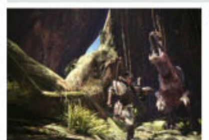
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

60 MINS



Stuck in the training area attempting to work out which of the weapons you like the look of as you head out on your very first hunt.

20 HOURS



Button mashing and slashing your way through a variety of monsters, using their skin to create a variety of hot new outfits and killer new weapons.

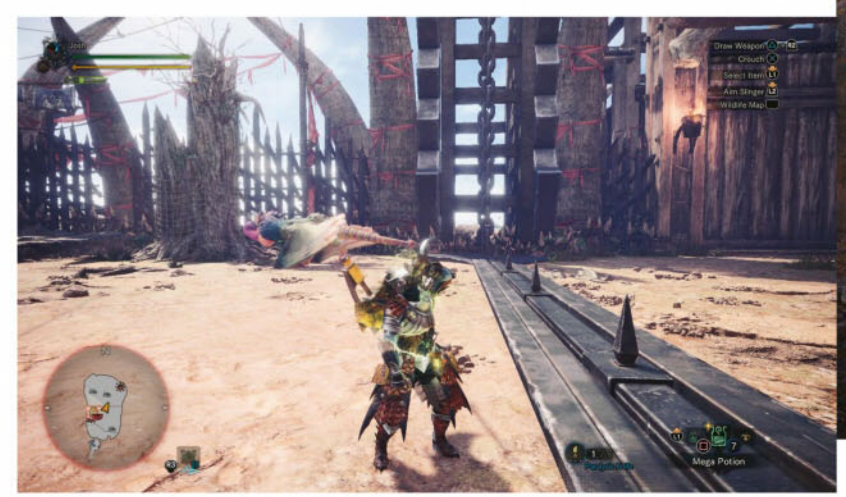
2 DAYS



Adventuring with your friends, tackling the toughest challenges, experimenting with the various configurations. It never seems to end.



Below: *Monster Hunter: World* sees Capcom streamlining the entire experience for both a Western and home console audience. While many of the changes have certainly made it easier to understand, it's by no means perfect in this regard.

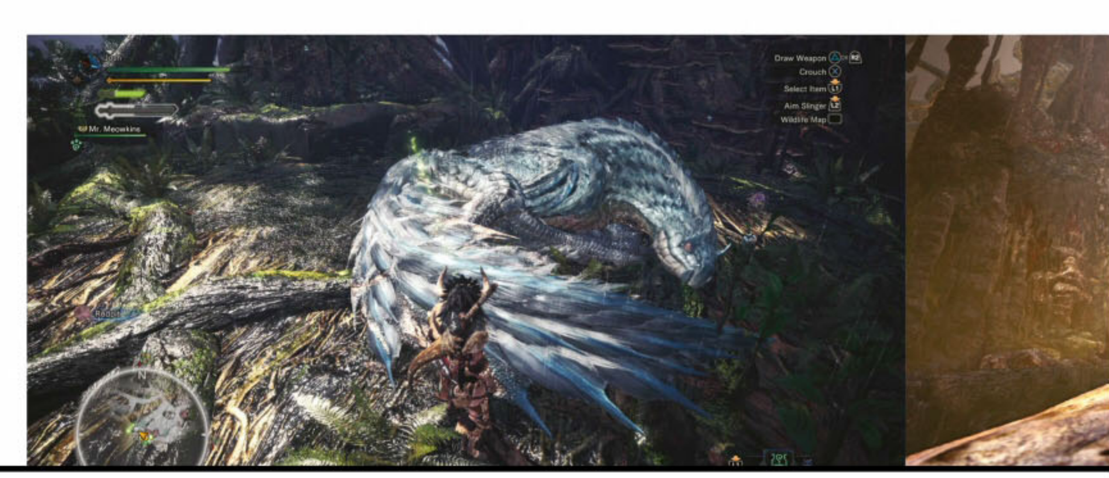




Above: *Monster Hunter: World* is fantastic in co-op when it works, though the convoluted lobby system and matchmaking times will likely frustrate.

High-rank play

Veteran hunters may be surprised to find little in the way of difficulty through the opening 20 hours or so. The curve is pretty lenient, particularly as you push through the mandatory campaign – designed in such a way that novices will get to see and enjoy a fair amount of the content (whether that be solo or in multiplayer) without too much of a hassle. That said, once you reach the High Rank quests the game shifts gear, with the complexity and scale of battles – and the armour and weaponry available to you – changing dramatically. *World* is the type of experience that really opens up once you crack the 40-hour barrier, though some will likely bemoan the amount of time it takes to really challenge your ability.





The problem is that it can take a little while to get there. Truth be told, you might never get there at all.

At the heart of the game is a combat system that's as unnecessarily convoluted in its construction as it has always been, but ultimately rewarding should you eventually find a way to connect with it. From the outset you'll be presented with 14 unique weapons – unique in that they are substantially different from one another, although no entirely *new* weapons have been introduced – dictating play style and effectiveness out in the field.

Each of these weapons informs sweeping alterations to the way that the game is played and, subsequently, enjoyed. *World* throws all of these at you immediately, offering very little in the way of suggestion or guidance. We can't overstate this enough: with 14 weapons to choose between, *World* essentially presents you with 13 different ways for you to initially hate and bounce off of the game. Find the one weapon that resonates with you, and your preferred play style, and you'll find a game experience that's frequently thrilling waiting – getting there can take one hell of a commitment though.

The commitment comes from the time investment involved in actually hunting and engaging in the creatures of Monster Hunter. While the combat system itself isn't necessarily complex in and of itself – each of the weapons governed by relatively simple combos and handling patterns – the monsters themselves *are* complex in their construction. *World* can be unforgiving in its starring fights, not that we'd necessarily want it any other way. They are battles of attrition, long and drawn-out wars against monsters that can frequently eclipse you in perseverance, power or agility (or sometimes all three, should you be particularly unlucky). It's a game of timing and patience; it takes great joy in punishing those that fail to prepare for battles, those that over-commit to attacks, and those that fail to capitalise on major opportunities to strike as and when they present themselves.

These battles can be intense and breathtaking, though they can also be long and frustrating. The introduction of damage numbers has improved the readability of beasts in battle, though so much of the experience is still found in watching for cues as open wounds and cracked shells begin to appear under your barrage of constant attacks. Purists can, of course, turn off this feature in the menus, but it's useful in helping to identify weak points and to help establish tactics in the midst of a fight.

This is important, because *World* still suffers from some frustratingly familiar pitfalls. Controls are (as we mentioned before) noticeably improved over past instalments, but still imbued with a degree of inherent clunkiness. Some elements, such as using the left-stick to sprint or the implementation of radial menus for item selection are huge (particularly for past players who might recall having to deform the shape of their left hand to survive let alone thrive in the PSP and 3DS editions), while others feel unnecessarily cumbersome, such as hiding vital options and ability triggers away in complex menu systems. The camera is also much improved from past Monster Hunter experiences, but that isn't exactly saying a lot. It frequently gets lost in among the chaos, a constant source of frustration when life or death can so often rely on surveying the environment and reading attack patterns with but a split-second to react. It doesn't quite hit the standard we'd expect of modern action-RPGs, and no amount of in-menu tweaking seems to fix its perplexing propensity for failing to follow along with the flow of action.

These slight improvements are introduced alongside a variety of practical tweaks that help improve the core loop for every hunter-gatherer. These include larger shifts, such as the addition of Scout Flies that help you locate targets quickly once you begin finding footprints and bodily fluids while out in the field, and a vastly streamlined array of system simplifications, including an almost instantaneous item crafting system and the ability to consume tonics and sharpen weapons in but a fraction of the time.

Of course, such simplifications don't permeate throughout the entirety of the game. Indeed, weapon and armour crafting (not to mention upgrading and customisation) can still be difficult to parse, the intricacies behind this system lost in the barrage of tutorials new players will encounter whilst pushing through the introductory campaign. For the most part, this helps make *World* feel more approachable than its predecessors, stripping away the delineation between single-player and multiplayer quests, and giving players a clear sense of progression through its biomes and beasts, though fans familiar with the core grind may bemoan the extended hand-holding, while new players will still likely feel overwhelmed for a solid 40 hours as it introduces an array of ideas in quick succession.

Much of this frustration does, admittedly, slip away once you're out in the biomes. The shift to console has ensured that this is without question the most beautiful game in the series to date. The scale of the worlds is staggering, full of life and colour; exotic and dangerous in equal measure, there has never been a better place to fight against creatures of the wilderness.

Each of the monsters to be found throughout *World* are a visual delight and beautifully animated, undercut somewhat by a severe amount of environmental clipping and frequent frame-skipping once you're engaged in battle. PS4 Pro owners too should immediately head into the settings to prioritise framerate at a locked resolution of 1080p – while it won't stabilise the game entirely, we wouldn't want to wade back into a big fight without the system's power focused here. The framerate and stability issues are likely a result of Capcom pushing to remove the loading screens that once separated areas, making each beautiful biome feel like a multi-layered living and thriving arena.

Interestingly, this shift means enemies will attempt to flee your brutal assaults without stalling the action. It's as mesmerising as it can be heartbreaking to see a once powerful and majestic creature limp away, attempting to escape your unwarranted act of aggression.

In many respects, cruelty is at the core of the Monster Hunter experience, whether through your tortuous acts of brutality against the native species or the game's cumbersome attempt to streamline a famously complex series for a casual audience. Still, there isn't anything quite like *Monster Hunter: World* out there on console – it's as frequently beautiful and mesmerising as it can be frustrating and exhausting. *World* is better than Monster Hunter has been in a long time, but by no means a perfect execution of the idea.



VERDICT 7/10

A FLAWED BUT LARGELY FULFILLING RELEASE

WORLDWIDE

TAKING GAMING ONLINE

NEED A FRIEND: If you find yourself stuck on a particularly tricky beast, you can fire off an SOS to the world and have other hunters enter your game to assist you in combat.

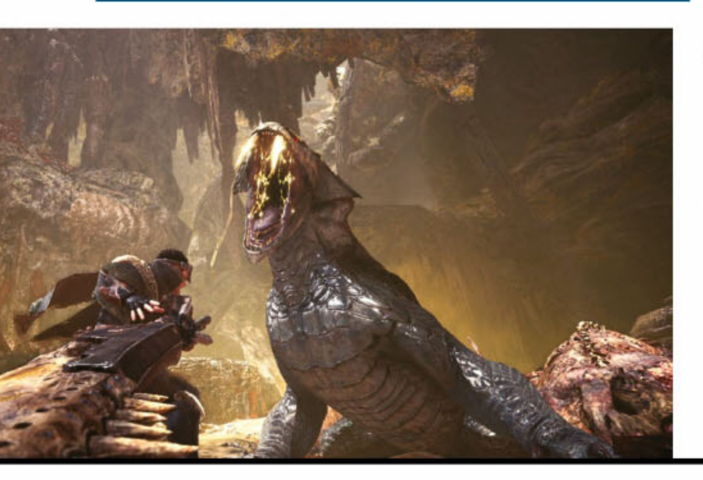
FAQs

Q. IS IT SUPER TOUGH?
While *World* has a fairly lenient difficulty curve, its learning curve is through the roof. Expect to spend some time learning the basics of its various systems.

Q. HOW LONG IS IT?
That's difficult to say. While the campaign will likely run you anywhere between 20 and 40 hours, it doesn't end there.

Q. ARE MORE MONSTERS COMING?
There's a surprisingly limited amount of monsters available to hunt in *World*, although Capcom has promised to bring more to the fray as free updates in the future.

CONTROLS ARE NOTICEABLY IMPROVED OVER PAST INSTALMENTS, BUT STILL IMBUED WITH A DEGREE OF INHERENT CLUNKINESS





Above: The battles, when they get towards the business end, can be quite spectacular with characters throwing planet-destroying fireballs at each other. If two players fire level three super moves at each other simultaneously then prepare to see some amazing fireworks.

WE'RE SAIYAN YOU SHOULD CHECK THIS OUT

Dragon Ball FighterZ

***Dragon Ball FighterZ* may well be up there as one of the best uses of a license ever – a perfect harmony of source material, genre, developer and execution not seen since, well, probably Rocksteady's *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (although that Platinum Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles game should've been an all-timer).** Of course, the team behind the brilliant *Guilty Gear Xrd*, with that game's fast-paced combat, air-dashing and OTT super-moves, would be able to capture the season-long battles between the characters in *Dragon Ball*. Its graphical style, which looks like stunning 2D art but is actually fully 3D and therefore allows for instant changes in perspective during fights, captures Akira Toriyama brilliantly, looking like a fully-interactive episode of the long-running animated series. If you're a fan of the source material, you're going to find yourself smitten with this before a punch, kick or Kamehameha has even been thrown.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Namco Bandai
DEVELOPER: Arc System Works
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

The attention to detail is next-to-none, and if you're a *Dragon Ball* fan, stumbling across one of the game's many Dramatic Finishes, activated by winning a battle in the same way it went down in the cartoon, will really blow your socks off. Japanese and English dubs, loads of incidental dialogue referencing niche events in the series. There's even a reference to the bizarre filler episode where Piccolo and Goku learned to drive. If that means anything to you at all, then you're going to love this.

What about everyone else, then? Guilty Gear is a great fighting game, and the Arc System Works pedigree is clear here. It is, however, a much more simplified experience than the aforementioned Guilty Gear, instead opting for a more accessible, instant combat system that can be picked up by anyone who applies themselves to it. It has a lower execution threshold, input commands that are universal across all the characters and automatic combos that yield impressive-looking results simply by hammering one of the four attack buttons over and over. Clearly a concession to the fact that a fair few people picking up this game might not be the most hardcore fighting game fans, but the hardest of hardcore *Dragon Ball* fans.

Auto combos are something that always sets alarm bells ringing. They often do nothing but encourage newcomers to mash buttons without actually teaching them anything about the intricacies of the combat. Making fighting

DRAGON BALL FIGHTERZ IS ONE OF THE BEST USES OF A LICENSE EVER – A PERFECT HARMONY OF SOURCE MATERIAL, GENRE, DEVELOPER AND EXECUTION

FAQs

Q. WHAT'S A SHENRON?
Shenron is the Dragon, summoned by the Balls. A rare occurrence in match, but will grant you a wish if you manage to do so.

Q. WHY ALL THE SAIYANS?
Yes, they're a bit same-y to those who aren't fans of the show. They play wildly differently, though!

Q. WHO COULD BE DLC?
We'd love to see the moustachioed strongman Mr Satan or a playable Master Roshi make the DLC roster!

Below: The combo tutorial gives you a good base knowledge of what each character can do, and gives you something to build from.



Left: The story mode is an original story, with a fairly contrived series of events taking place to get a bunch of heroes and villains from across the entire Dragon Ball series to come together in one big ruck.
Below: Catching a sleeping opponent with Android 16's Self Destruct level 3 super is a wonderfully satisfying thing. Dangerous, as it leaves you with 1 HP remaining, but eliminates their character from the match instantly.



games accessible is an incredibly fine line to walk – too hard and you put off a large chunk of the general gaming audience and too easy and there's simply nothing to keep you playing for any real length of time – but *Dragon Ball FighterZ* gets the balance right. The auto combos aren't optimal by any means, and you're quickly encouraged to try more advanced stuff. There's a universal combo route that works with every character, learning that acts as a base for further experimentation.

The real technical stuff lies in the assists. It's a 3v3 fighting game, and much like *Marvel vs Capcom 2*, a game that has a strong influence on *Dragon Ball FighterZ*, learning which characters work well with one another is the key to victory. A jab of the assist button calls them in to deliver a specific attack and working out how and when to best utilise them opens up potential for some spectacular and damaging combos. You can also use them as a diversionary tool, telling Cell to appear – mad, green-pronged hat and all – and fire a Kamehameha blast across the screen while you take the opportunity to teleport behind your baffled opponent, for instance.

Guilty Gear games are known for having brilliant tutorials, but they're fundamentally quite challenging due to all of the systems for attack and defence you have at your disposal at any one time. *Dragon Ball FighterZ*'s tutorial isn't as in-depth, but then it doesn't need to be. It does, however, do a great job in explaining all of the unique mechanics in this game, from the damage-increasing Sparking Blast, to the ability to parry incoming attacks. Combo trials for all of the characters are also useful to play through too, giving you a quick feel for some of the more advanced stuff they can do, as well as being an effective way to find out which ones you find the most fun to play.

Avoiding the issue that plagued *Street Fighter V*'s launch, *Dragon Ball FighterZ* has a fair bit of content out of the box. As well as the aforementioned tutorials, there's a nice twist on Arcade Mode, which has you attempting to fulfil specific criteria as you fight your way through the roster, gaining access to extra battles and even unlocking secret characters if you succeed. There's also a story mode that has you – as in YOU, sat there reading this – taking over the body of Goku and battling through a full voice-acted tale written for the game.

Dragon Ball FighterZ manages to be an entertaining and deep fighting game, easily one of the best to come out of this genre resurgence of the past few years, whilst also being accessible for those who simply want to watch their favourite characters knock seven shades out of one another in spectacular fashion. For Arc System Works, a company that has put out top-tier fighting games for 20 years now, it's a chance to really get some deserved crossover success and square up, nose-to-nose, with the big boys over at Namco Bandai and Capcom. Fans of fighting and Dragon Ball will find a lot to love here and, wow, if you're a fan of both – this is an absolutely essential game.

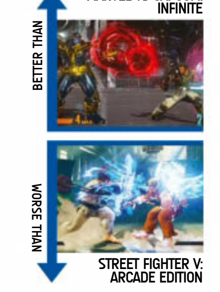
WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

WORLDWIDE WARRIOR At the time of writing, the servers were not online so, unfortunately, we were unable to test online play. Judging from their pre-launch beta tests, the signs are looking good, but bear this in mind when you hook up.

FAN SERVICE

If the presentation wasn't enough to blow Dragon Ball fans away, there's also some hidden stage/character specific Dramatic Finishes to be found through experimentation. Remember a key moment in a battle from the long-running series? Who was involved, where it took place and how it finished? Try recreating those final moments with the appropriate characters and stage selected and see what happens! Kid Gohan evaporating Cell, or poor Yamcha getting cratered by Nappa, for instance. There's even a few 'alternate ending' style Dramatic Finishes where, again, picking the right mix of characters and stage can play out a 'what if' scenario. It's a lovely cherry on top of the cake that is *Dragon Ball FighterZ*'s amazing presentation and something that long-time fans of the manga/series will undoubtedly get a huge kick out of finding.

BETTER THAN: MARVEL VS CAPCOM: INFINITE

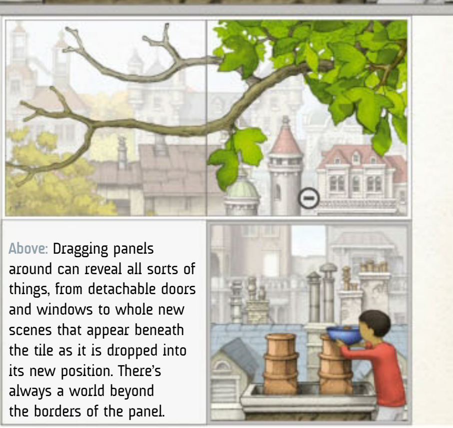


WORSE THAN: STREET FIGHTER V: ARCADE EDITION

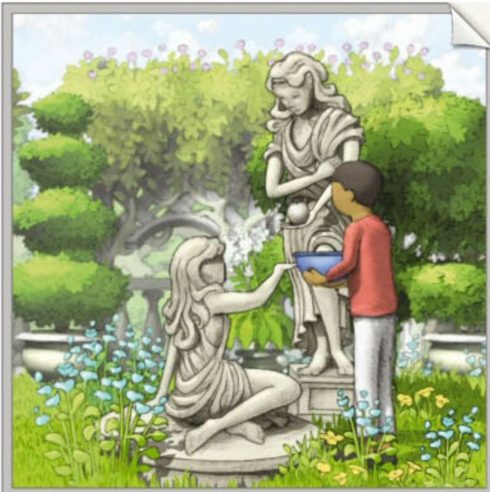


THE BEST DRAGON BALL GAME TO DATE.





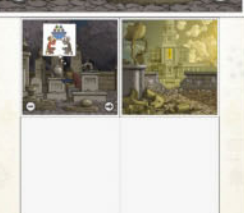
Above: Dragging panels around can reveal all sorts of things, from detachable doors and windows to whole new scenes that appear beneath the tile as it is dropped into its new position. There's always a world beyond the borders of the panel.











DRAG AND DROP PUZZLING

Gorogoa

There are moments playing *Gorogoa* when its interwoven imagery and puzzle-solving coalesce in such a way that we felt almost euphoric. And as we say that, we hear how utterly overblown and absurd that must sound. However, for all its simplicity in design and style, this is a meticulously constructed puzzle adventure that is a joy to wander through.

As an experience, it sits somewhere between a point and click adventure game and one of those picture puzzles where you drag tiles around in order to complete the image. Except that in this case, the images are interactive and have depth. Essentially, you're trying to help a boy collect a series of orbs in a bowl, as an offering to a monster of some kind. In doing so, you have to drag, align and separate tiles to aid his progress, helping him towards this goal. What emerges beneath that is a time-hopping and dimension-bending journey that reveals worlds within worlds.

A door or window in an image might be detached from the tile if you drag it away, revealing a whole new scene. Then you might pan left, right or zoom this new scene to reveal something new. And if you drag the empty doorway back suddenly, a new path opens up. The way that images can interplay and interact with each other is genuinely thrilling.

The story of *Gorogoa* is presented subtly. It's unobtrusive to the point of being ignorable if you only care about the puzzle solving (and that is engrossing enough), but it's quite affecting if you dive into its imagery and message. It depicts worlds of peace, war and recovery in interesting ways, even going as far as showing a kind of heavenly afterlife at one point. There's no dialogue or text to draw from here. Everything needs to be interpreted from the world, the illustrations and animation. It paints a surreal, impressionistic picture of the setting, culture and life of this world, which we're still finding connections to as we play and replay the game.

Which is a nice surprise in itself given how this sort of puzzle experience rarely stands up to repeat visits. *Gorogoa* has the morsels of intrigue beneath the surface that mean that even when you know every move and every secret of the mechanics, it can still offer you something you didn't notice before in its story or art. The animated panels that freeze into gorgeous illustrations are packed with objects and items to ponder. This is a game with immense depth and enjoyment. We wouldn't go so far as to say that it's incredibly challenging or even that long of an experience, but its lean and meticulous design is precisely what makes it so potent.

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
OTHER FORMATS: Switch, PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Annapurna Interactive
DEVELOPER: Buried Signal
PRICE: £4.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: BACK TO BED



AS GOOD AS: THE WITNESS

FINGERPRINT

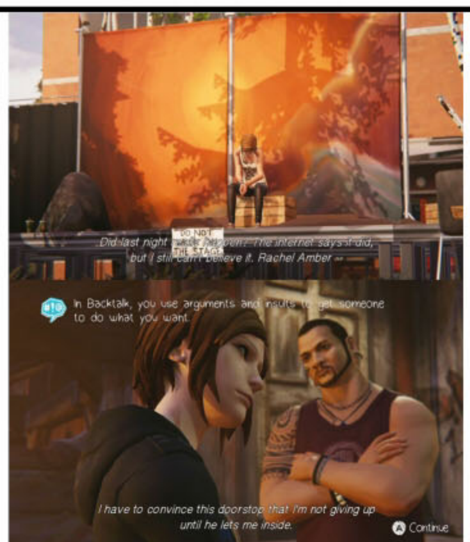
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

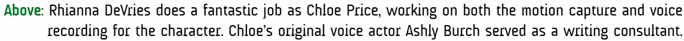
SLOW BURN: Designer Jason Roberts began work on this game in 2011, starting with the concept for an interactive comic merged with a card game. Its gradual evolution has clearly helped in packing it full of cool content and ideas.

VERDICT 9/10

A SIMPLE AND HIGHLY AFFECTING PUZZLER






Above: Rhianna DeVries does a fantastic job as Chloe Price, working on both the motion capture and voice recording for the character. Chloe's original voice actor Ashly Burch served as a writing consultant.

ALWAYS SAID SHE HAD A WAY WITH WORDS

Life Is Strange: Before The Storm

This should never have worked. While it has never been particularly constructive to approach a new game with cynicism at heart, that was easier said than done when it came to *Life Is Strange: Before The Storm*. As far as episodic narrative adventures go, this one just felt a little unnecessary. *Life Is Strange* seemed so perfectly paced and considered, with original developer DontNod having achieved so much, and with so much style, with its angsty meditation on millennial youth.

Did we really need a three-episode prequel starring the absolute personification of small town rebellion, Chloe Price, with a different developer, Deck Nine, working behind the polygons alongside a new voice actor for Price in Rhianna DeVries?

As it happens, we really, *really* did. *Before The Storm* is impressive in so many ways, though perhaps its biggest achievement is in coming so close to surpassing the original. Deck Nine didn't just deliver more of the same, but instead stepped up and built a finely tuned adventure that feels perfectly in tune with Chloe and her antagonistic, hot-headed personality.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

BACK TALK: New game mechanics tied to Chloe's talent for dominating arguments help keep lengthy conversations feel both interesting and fresh.

You'll see this reflected in everything, from the dangerous rabbit hole she finds herself tumbling down, to the curated and energetic soundtrack, to new game mechanics designed to distract from the creeping monotony that can so commonly be attributed to simply walking and talking for hours on end.

Max Caulfield might have had time-shifting powers to help get her out of trouble (or into more of it, we suppose) but Chloe has no such supernatural attributes. Instead, she possesses something that oh-so-many teenagers seem to: she can backtalk with the best of them.

Before The Storm makes Chloe's argumentative spirit a part of the game itself rather than merely a quirk of the character. It brightens up an array of situations and conversations, letting you engage in a feisty back and forth to force your will onto the world, using the ability to cut to the core of an opponent's emotional fragility to come out victorious in a variety of tense situation. Well, victorious if not necessarily any better off.

Before The Storm paints a version of Arcadia Bay that is fraught with danger, and the three episodes reflect that with a story that has both tension and heartbreak at its very core – that's an aspect of the game that only increases the more of Chloe and Rachel Amber's relationship you explore. Deck Nine puts you in some difficult positions, though the studio hasn't quite matched DontNod in that respect; *Before The Storm* does lack the breathtaking and emotionally crippling aspects that permeated through *Life Is Strange*'s original run, and that's one area where some players might come away slightly disappointed.

Before The Storm, however, does its best to tell an interesting and unique story while still getting the pieces and characters in place for the original *Life Is Strange* narrative. While it is, ultimately, limited by its position as a prequel, the strength of the writing, pacing and direction really solidify this as a must play.

VERDICT 8/10

A KILLER PREQUEL THAT ALMOST TOPS THE ORIGINAL

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: Deck Nine
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

WORSE THAN

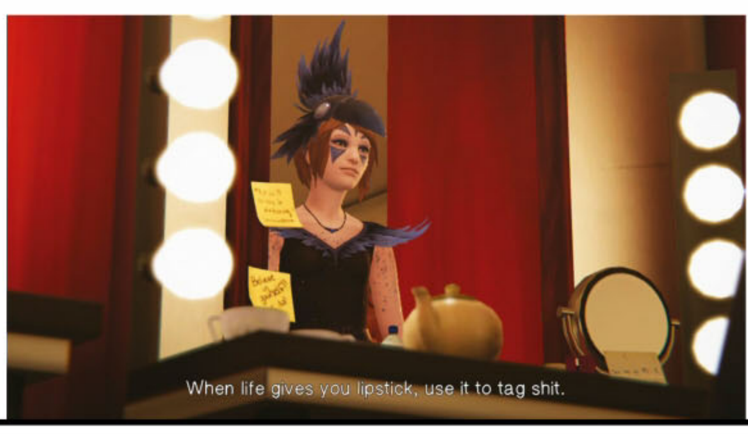
LIFE IS STRANGE



AS GOOD AS



TALES FROM THE BORDERLANDS

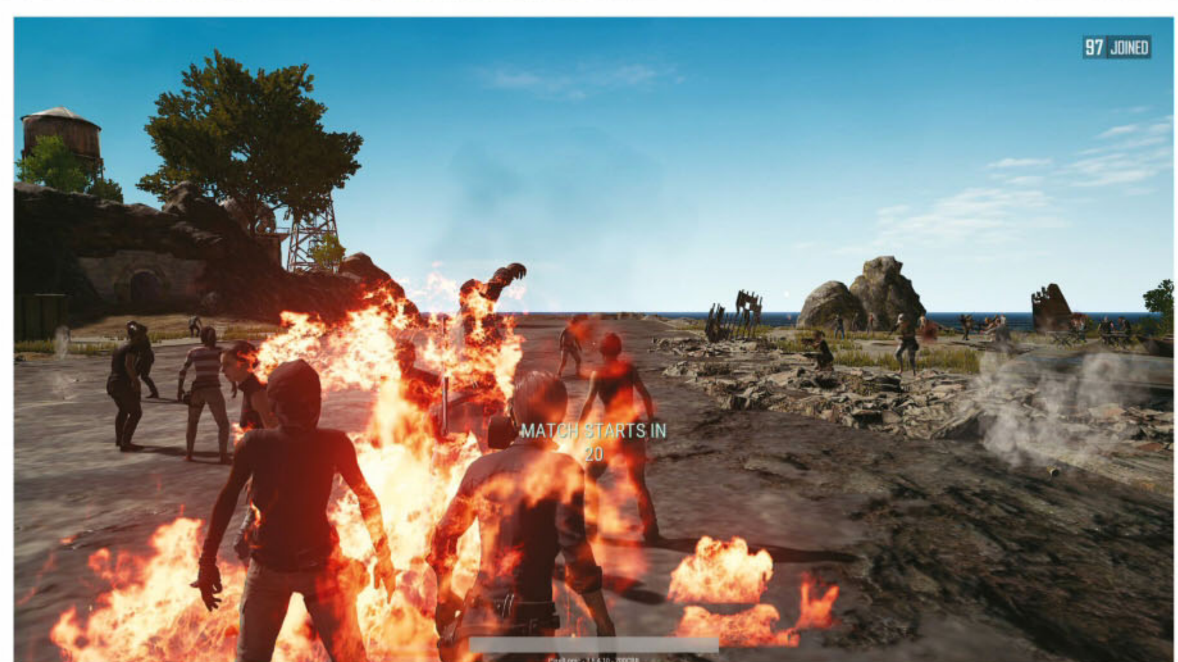


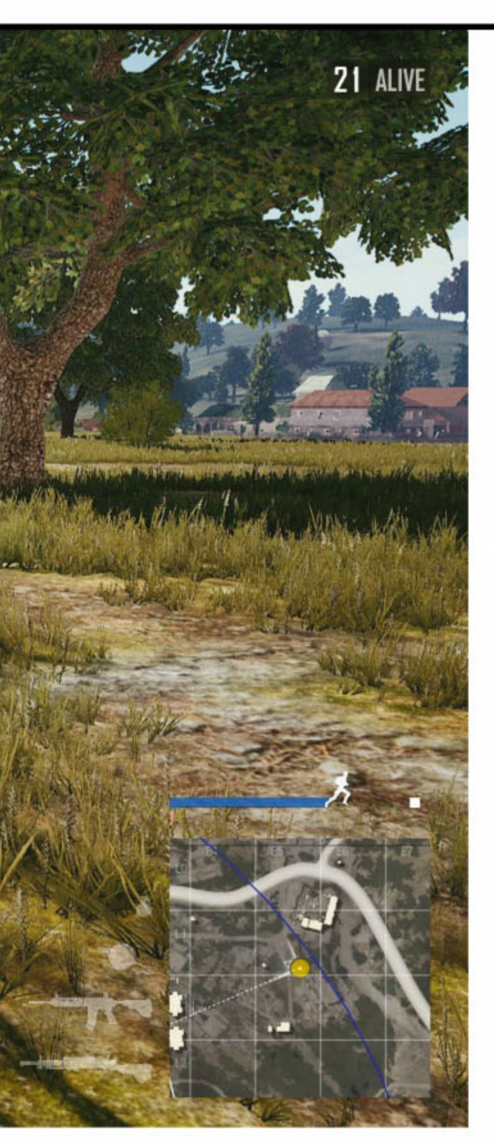
Left: *Before The Storm* features a wonderful soundtrack. While the bulk of it is an original composition by UK indie band Daughter, the rest is as equally delightful, with the likes of Pretty Vicious and Speedy Ortiz making some notable contributions.

THE GENIUS OF THE GAME IS THAT WHILE THE RULE SET IS COMPREHENSIBLE TO JUST ABOUT ANYONE, IT REALLY IS AN OPEN EXPERIENCE THAT ALLOWS FOR SO MUCH DIVERSITY

BE KIND, REWIND

The game has recently added a replay and death cam feature that gives players a real sense of where they went wrong. Before, it was a lot of guesswork to figure out how you died, but now you can find out once a game ends, either in a short clip of the other player killing you, or you can use the full replay feature to watch an entire game from any angle and understand how a situation unfolded. It's really quite interesting to watch how teams interact with each other, but also seeing how much you missed. (Also, you can make some pretty rad videos from it – though that's neither here nor there.)





A (PARACHUTE) JUMP INTO THE GREAT UNKNOWN

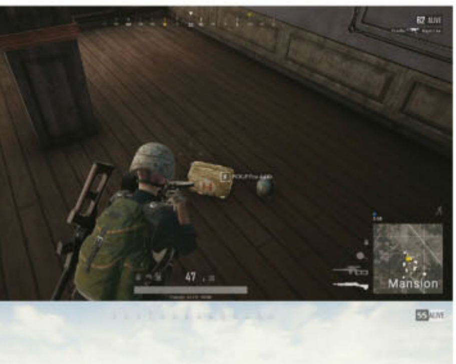
PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds

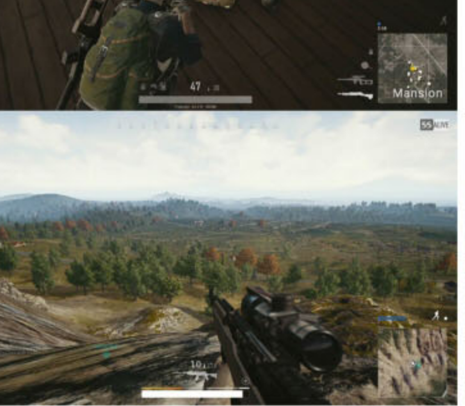
DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: South Korea
PUBLISHER: Bluehole Studio
DEVELOPER: PUBG Corporation
PRICE: £26.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 100
MINIMUM SPEC: Intel Core i3-4340 / AMD FX-6300, 6GB RAM, GeForce GTX660 2GB / RadeonHD 7850 2GB, 30GB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Left: The game has a bunch of vehicles, from buggies, cars, vans, jeeps and motorbikes, boats and the new jet ski.







Left: The game does come with a first-person mode, essentially stopping annoying camera peeking. Note, however, that it's still rough and obviously not designed from the ground up. It's good the option is there though.

What is there left to say about *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds*? When the game hit Early Access in March 2017, it was everywhere. Like a tidal wave, it was unstoppable. While we see titles come out of nowhere and get big audiences every year (see *Stardew Valley* and *Undertale* for recent examples), nothing has felt as impactful and immediate as *PUBG*.

If you've played a videogame in the last 12 months, you'll likely have played or seen it in some capacity, and already formed some sort of opinion on it. And yet here it is, emerging from Early Access and ready for judgement as a full title. So, if we're going to find something new to say about *Battlegrounds* we need to go back to the basics here, strip away all the baggage, all the layers of Twitch streaming, the awards, the hoopla and just ask the all-important question: "Is *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* any good?"

There are a number of variations on the Battle Royal formula, but *PUBG* has standardised the rule set and, for good reason, become the benchmark against which all the wannabes need to be judged. You can feel the legacy of steady iteration at the heart of this release, growing over recent years, thanks to the work of Brendan 'PlayerUnknown' Greene. The mode first cut its teeth as a mod for games such as *Arma II* and *DayZ*, before later being adapted into full works. A part of what makes the concept so irresistible is that the central conceit is so very simple: a host of players are dropped into a sprawling space, they fight over loot while slowly being centralised to one portion of a map, forcing them to fight until only one person or team remains. And after almost a year it's lost nothing.

Once in game, you're loaded into a lobby area with 99 other players before being pulled into a plane with your fellow marauders. From there, you get to see the entirety of the map, allowing you to choose exactly where you want to land and begin your fight for survival. As you eject from the plane you'll need to pick your landing zone, and rapidly adapt to your situation as you see it from the air – once your parachute opens, you'll be able to see how crowded (or to use the game's nomenclature: "spicy") a drop is. You might have to scramble for a gun to shoot anyone who's dropped next to you, or you may be able to take it slowly, methodically looking through the buildings around you. The loot you're scrambling for is plentiful, but you'll always be hunting for more.

Guns, melee weapons, attachments, ammo, various health items, helmets, backpacks and body armour will all be on your list of things to acquire. Before too long, a white circle will appear on your map, along with a timer. Once the time runs down, the "blue" will start to compress to meet the white circle, and you (usually) want to be inside that circle before you are consumed by the force field. Of course, while all of this is going, on you'll be seeing and engaging with other players, trying to fight your way to the position you want to be in. Eventually, the entire field will be dwindled down and the circle will become almost impossibly small. Something will give, and one will remain, claiming victory and the all-important "chicken dinner".

It's a simple set of rules. Distilled, it's essentially 'drop, loot, run, kill'. The genius of the game, however, is that while the rule set is comprehensible to just about anyone, it really is an open experience that allows for so much diversity in terms of its moment-to-moment play. To some degree, you get to control the level of engagement you want at the beginning of the game. If you want to drop in hot and get into a fight from the off, you might want to drop at a popular destination such as Erangel's "School" or Miramar's "Wrestling Ring". Or you can look to remote houses that will have a little less loot, but allow you to build up your inventory slowly (and a little more safely). You can decide if you want to chase the sound of gunshots in the hope of catching a team unawares after a big fight. Or, if you want to cower in a toilet somewhere and just try to survive, that's okay too – if anything, that's a highly recommended stategy.

PUBG's simple foundation allows you so much freedom to tailor your experience.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

PLAYER POWER: While Custom games do exist in the game world, they are only available to very select players. It's a shame this functionality is not available to more people.

It requires constant decision-making and risk management, causing a delightfully uncomfortable experience. It's no exaggeration to say that it's one of the tensest experiences in the entire medium. The sound design of the game is such that it's supposed to make you constantly on edge. The bullet sounds are huge and impactful, giving you information about the direction and distance of the shooter. It's genuinely edge-of-your-seat stuff. In many ways, the game is almost a horror title – forgoing gore and traditional genre elements – but like the best, ratcheting up the tension until you get the final, terrifying release of a scare you always knew was coming. Even after hundreds of hours of play and an understanding of the systems, you can still get shot by someone playing their first game. It really does feel like an even playing field that just has too many strategies, too much going on between 100 players to ever truly be mastered. There is always uncertainty that lingers, which is where all the best tension lives.

This goes both ways though. While it is terrifying to not know where you are getting shot from when you weren't expecting it, getting the drop on a player and unloading on them feels incredible. The 'kill-feel' of *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* is unmatched. There is no better rush than overcoming a firefight and seeing the red text confirming your prize pop up.

One interesting note is that even after weeks of in-game time, you will still be experimenting with the weapons. You'll have a sense of why a SCAR is better than an AK at a set distance, but not the full context of it. No gun feels too weak, and no gun feels too strong (besides the ones you find in risky-to-get red crates that are sky-dropped into the game periodically), each one having its place, often led by an earned personal preference. Some will swear by the M4 over an M16, others will argue the other way. Besides the loading area of the Erangel, where damage is turned off until all 100 players are ushered onto the plane, there is no place to get your hands on a gun and shoot it at a target at your own leisure.

While this could be a bad thing, there's a reason to it. In a game design sense, it means the only way to make up your mind on which guns you like is to learn by doing. You have to get out there, get your hands dirty and shoot at other players in different situations to understand which guns you have a preference for. While there are third-party sources that will break the weapons down into numbers, they lack the context of the in-the-moment feel of the game. Everything feels viable in various situations and, in some ways, personal to you. It's not often praised, but it speaks wonders to the game's discipline and fine balance.

While a kill does indeed feel amazing, it pales in comparison to getting a win. It's hard to describe the feeling of finally picking up your first. You have to show good decision making, skill and also a fair bit of luck to get into the final skirmish for the game. Keeping a situational awareness of where everyone is or could be, waiting for your time to strike, and then, once it all kicks off, keeping your head to focus on just murdering another player in a one-on-one situation is a euphoric feeling that games often try to replicate but always fall short on. It's heart-pounding. Literally. (And, of course, there is the desk-smacking disappointment when you come second.) That experience is so rare to find. It is one to treasure in any game that can do it even once. The fact that *PUBG* can do it over and over again for such a long time is a testament to how tight and wonderful the experience can be.

There are, of course, some weaknesses. For one, it's not the prettiest. While it's easy to overlook such a flaw, there's no getting around the fact that *PUBG* looks rough around the edges – textures are ugly and a lot of environmental assets and buildings have a tendency to look as if they are still a work-in-progress. This was fine for Early

FAQs

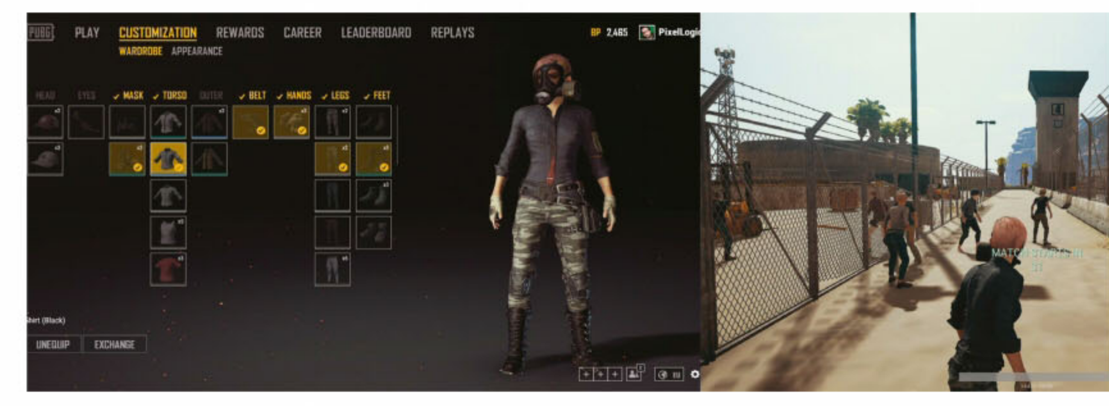
Q. HOW LONG IS A GAME?
If you're unlucky, less than a minute. If you survive to the end, however, somewhere in the region of 25-30 minutes.

Q. ARE THE GAMES STABLE?
For the most part. When it first came into 1.0, it had terrible rubber banding issues, but it seems to have stablised.

Q. WHAT'S THE MOST POWERFUL ITEM?
There are many powerful weapons, but the ghillie suit is possibly the best item. It's actually near impossible to spot on the right terrain.



Right: While skill will obviously get you far, sometimes the most important thing in the game is luck. Never sniff your nose at it when it goes your way.



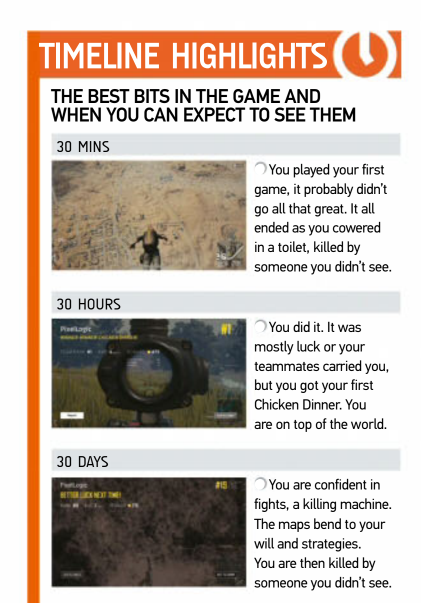
Above: The game's reward system is based on lootboxes. While there are several cool items, for the most part they are uninteresting bits of everyday clothing.



THERE IS NO BETTER RUSH THAN OVERCOMING A FIREFIGHT AND SEEING THE RED TEXT CONFIRMING YOUR PRIZE POP UP



Below: Erangel is the original map in *PUBG*. It takes place on a fictional Eastern European island, with a hilly landscape and a scattering of forests. It's got it all, from a school to prisons, cities to the dreaded Military Island.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

30 MINS

You played your first game, it probably didn't go all that great. It all ended as you cowered in a toilet, killed by someone you didn't see.

30 HOURS

You did it. It was mostly luck or your teammates carried you, but you got your first Chicken Dinner. You are on top of the world.

30 DAYS

You are confident in fights, a killing machine. The maps bend to your will and strategies. You are then killed by someone you didn't see.



A GAME OF TWO MAPS

There are two maps currently in the game for you to play, chosen at random at the start of a session. Erangel is the classic map, based on hilly countryside with lots of little farmhouses and a couple of bigger cities. It was the original Early Access map, and is now probably seen as one of the most iconic online maps ever made. The other is Miramar, which is the game's new desert map. The terrain here is much rougher and more craggy, but with brutal sight lines. It favours long-range most of the time, but when the final circles arrive, it can be great as it is full of nooks and crannies to hide in. Fan opinion on the map seems split, but we really like it.



Access, but is frustrating now that the game is into its retail build. Another consistent irritation in *PUBG* comes in the form of its history of suffering problematic cheaters. Every once in a while, you will find yourself killed by someone who has an aimbot, sniping you in the head from across the map, or other such unnatural annoyances. This is an ongoing fight for the developers and, while it isn't something that will affect most games, it is always disheartening when it happens – and the future success of the game will largely depend on how well the studio is able to keep its servers under control.

Interestingly, the game also lacks a real progression system. You don't get levels, you don't unlock new abilities or anything that you often tie to other online games. There are loot boxes in the game, but for the most part, they're filled with uninteresting, generic clothing. Opening them is something you will occasionally remember to do, rather than being something that drives you to play more, like for example in *Overwatch*. There are leaderboards, but unless you're the kind of person who cares about what exact percentile of a playerbase you're in, there isn't much to dive into. *PUBG* flies in the face of everything we know about modern multiplayer games by not having a real tangible reason to keep grinding away at its systems.

And while that could be seen as a downside, it only helps *PUBG*'s cause at the end of the day.

SYNTHESIS

BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

HYBRID GENRE: Battle Royale games are essentially a mix of both a shooter and a survival game. It takes an experience like *DayZ* and speeds up the experience to nearer the pace of a shooter.

The fact that so many players have dumped so many hundreds (or thousands) of hours into the game – despite there being no carrot on a stick, just the thrill of going one more round – is possibly the biggest endorsement that the game can have. Once-in-a-generation games don't, by their very definition, come along very often. But *PUBG* feels like a once-in-a-generation title. Perhaps not since *Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* has a game felt like it was about to change the entire landscape. That game revolutionised what it was to be a modern shooter, and so many games today owe themselves to that title. *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* is having a similar affect.

We are already seeing games use the model the title has perfected and that will only continue. A phenomenon in this industry, a true one, always carries influence long after its release, and this game has the feeling of one that will have its tendrils in so many future games. It's no mistake either. From the way it treats guns, to kill-feel, to the simple rule set that allows so many avenues for fun and frolics on the battlefield, to ultimately, the way it can make you feel while playing, there is a special sauce in this game that just isn't in so many others. And so here we are, returning to that all-important question: "Is *PUBG* actually good?" The answer is clearly an emphatic: "Hell yeah."



VERDICT 9/10

PUBG LIVES UP TO ITS MONSTROUSLY LARGE REPUTATION





Above: *Floor Kids* includes a local multiplayer mode, in which two dancers take turns in the circle to get the crowd popping off, though it's little more than a fun distraction to the main story mode.

OFF BEAT

Floor Kids

Capturing the essence of such a freeform and athletic style of street dance in a videogame was never going to be easy. As an outlet for artistic expression, the form and culture surrounding breakdancing has always been defined by the wild creativity so actively displayed by its best and brightest. Were any game to try and do it justice, it would need to bottle that enthusiasm and unleash it against an intimately crafted core design. One consisting of a dedication to slavishly exploiting a beat, of finding an appropriate balance between technical footwork and physical power, and of utilising a unpredictable blur of Toprock and Downrock style drops to push a crowd from passive observers to wilful participants – the energy setting the tempo as much as the blast of the beat.

Floor Kids for Nintendo Switch is intuitively designed and so clearly created by a passionate collection of developers. All of the pieces are there for this stylish rhythm game: it has style, it's got flow, and there's one hell of a fantastic OST from Kid Koala too. And yet, in spite of its best efforts, *Floor Kids* fails to reflect the creativity and freedom best associated with breakdancing. With each song consisting of the same basic formula, and every character coming with a pre-defined set of moves and combos, *Floor Kids* becomes tired long before you've explored all that it has to offer.

MERJ does its best to keep things fresh throughout, but it isn't enough in the end. Graded on the rhythm of your taps of the face-buttons, the fluidity of your combos, and the originality of your moves, *Floor Kids* has the framework for something fun, even if it never quite delivers on its initial promise. Chaining combos together is enjoyable enough, with the fast and improvisational aspect to its design helping to set it apart from most other modern rhythm games. But there are only so many times you can roll a six-step into Power hold or Freeze across 24 tracks before repetition begins to set in.

Each character comes with their own particular strengths and weaknesses – pushing you to explore new avenues of play and style – though tying specific combo sets to specific characters will ultimately restrict what you can and cannot express to a track. *Floor Kids* seeks to deliver freeform play, but it quickly becomes rote and mechanical; every track follows the same structure, the characters restrict you to the same dance template, and the result is an experience that will only hold the attention for so long.

Floor Kids is different and, for a short while, a lot of fun. The soundtrack is brilliant, the art style is gorgeous to behold, and the basic construction of its systems and mechanics is certainly impressive – fuelled by passion. Sadly, *Floor Kids* lacks the variety or freedom in its core design to ever really offer more than surface-level engagement.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Switch
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: MERJ Media
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

SICK BEAT: The balance *Floor Kids* strikes between slick movement, sick beats, and solid scoring certainly sets it apart from the crowd.

VERDICT 6/10

A FUN BUT ULTIMATELY FLAWED IDEA

BETTER THAN: PARAPPA THE RAPPER REMASTERED



WORSE THAN: DJ HERO



Above: The soundtrack from renowned DJ and producer Koala Kid is one of the best aspects of the game, with the 24 bass-heavy tracks sticking in the mind long after you've switched the Switch off after a play session.

DROPPING THE BALL

Lost Sphear

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Switch
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: Tokyo RPG Factory
PRICE: £37.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

With western design influencing modern RPGs across the globe today, there is an appetite for a classic-style JRPG in the vein of the SNES-era Final Fantasy games. *I Am Setsuna* developer Tokyo RPG Factory is looking to fill that void (the name alone feels like a mission statement), however, its follow-up, *Lost Sphear*, shows the developer has a lot to learn. The game isn't bad, exactly. It's just so 'okay' that it's frustrating. It doesn't do anything to offend genre fans, nor does it do anything to set itself apart from its inspiration. It just exists.

The story is competent, but it's hamstrung by its presentation – and it's not the visuals that are the problem here. In fact, they're fine and even evocative. It's the *way* the story is presented where the problem lies. Story beats just kind of happen, with little to no nuance or care for storytelling. The musical score in cutscenes rarely shifts to match the mood, and characters often lack personality in their movement, making scenes play out in what feels like the gaming equivalent of a table read.

That doesn't make it a write-off, though. It's saved by its battle system. Once your characters draw their weapons, meters fill much like your usual active-time battlers – think *Chrono Trigger*. Once you select an action to perform, you can position a character to a location where you want them to perform that act. It evolves the tried-and-tested ATB setup and gives it a strategic edge – you can move a party member to blast multiple enemies with a beam attack, for example, or position your party together to benefit from an AOE heal. It works, and it is supplemented well by a robust customisation system where you can add elemental effects to damaging abilities, or evasion boosts to healing ones. This is then supported *further* by structures that you can build on the game's overworld, granting your entire party passive buffs. It makes the game's back end highly personalisable, and it's enjoyable to play around with.

That all said, there are some balancing issues when it comes down to some encounters. We came across enemies that forced the party into a sleep state indefinitely, and just before the final boss is a mandatory regular enemy battle that's tougher than the game's climactic showdown. You can also exploit buffs and ability effects enough that you become more or less unstoppable, too.

For everything good *Lost Sphear* does, there's something dragging it down. If Tokyo RPG Factory is hoping to win fans of old-school JRPG fans over, it needs to try harder, because right now it feels as if the studio is dragging its heels. And, honestly, positioning a 20-hour, flawed RPG like this at a £40 price point feels like nothing short of arrogance.

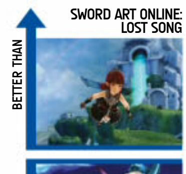
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

VANTAGE POINT: Being able to freely position your party is good and all, but we'd go one step further and give enemies weak points that you have to position characters around to hit.

BETTER THAN

SWORD ART ONLINE: LOST SONG





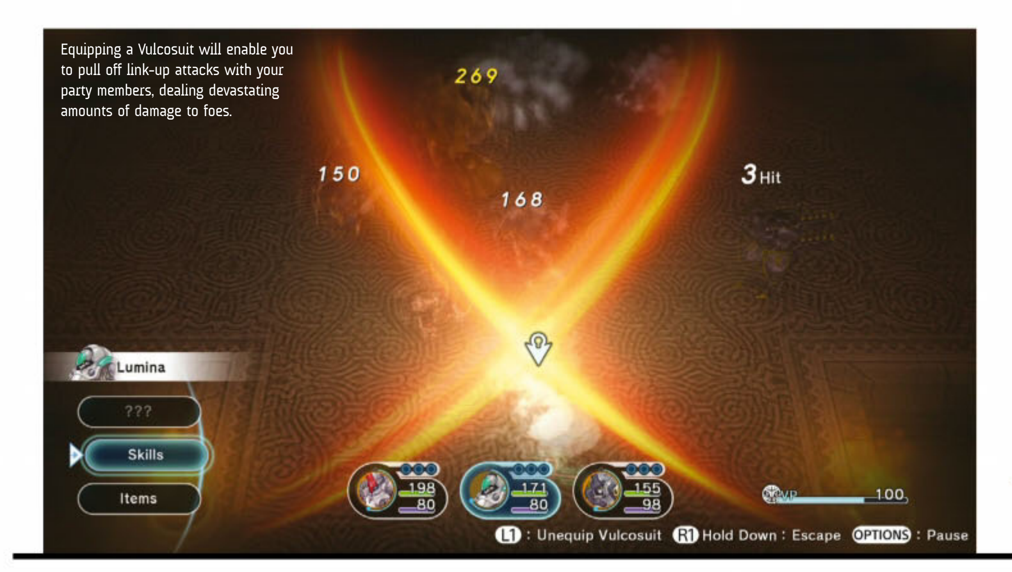
BRAVELY DEFAULT

WORSE THAN



Above: Similar to *Final Fantasy II*'s keyword system, you can harvest 'memories' from conversations to upgrade abilities of construct Artifacts.





Equipping a Vulcosuit will enable you to pull off link-up attacks with your party members, dealing devastating amounts of damage to foes.



VERDICT 5/10

THERE'S A GOOD RPG IN THERE SOMEWHERE







Above: *The Inpatient* shouldn't take you more than a couple of hours to complete, but there are lots of secrets hidden away in the game and many won't reveal themselves until you've tried at least a second run. You might want to change genders as well.

CAN SUPERMASSIVE'S GAME MATCH ITS IMPRESSIVE TECH?

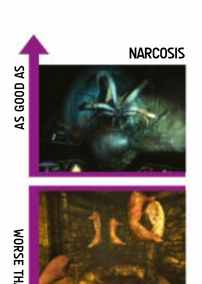
The Inpatient

Supermassive Games is no stranger to VR, having created the terrifying rollercoaster/lightgun game *Rush Of Blood* for the peripheral's successful launch. The Guildford-based developer's second VR game once again utilises horror, but in a way that's completely different to what it attempted with *Rush Of Blood*. It's also nowhere near as effective.

Set once again in the *Until Dawn* universe, the events of *The Inpatient* are set 60-years prior to the original game. You start off as an inpatient of the notorious Blackwood Sanatorium, unaware of where you are and desperate for answers. It's a cliché-ridden start that can be found in so many similar games, but the immersive nature of VR drives home the futility of your situation (strapped down in a chair with a doctor looming over you). The game's sense of place is further driven home by the clever voice recognition that Supermassive Games has added. Throughout the game you're given various questions to answer and you can reply with your voice, adding the relevant inflections and emotions for added effect. It works very well (with only the occasional hiccup) and further drives home the advantages of VR over traditional games. It feels like you're talking to actual people, providing of course you can ignore their often stilted and clichéd dialogue.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PSVR
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: Supermassive Games
PRICE: £24.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Weak script aside, the story does build relatively well during its first half, particularly as you're introduced to a new patient who shares a room with you and you experience the everyday routines of being locked in a room. By night you're visited by nightmarish visions, with Supermassive throwing mischievous jump scares at you, juxtaposed to the everyday mundanity of being enclosed in your small cell. Before long the regular visits start to cease, and it soon becomes very obvious that all is not well in Blackwood Sanatorium.

And it's here that *The Inpatient* begins to lose steam. While it still has some fantastically tense moments it fails to continue the unease and uncertainty that built up so well in the game's opening half. While you can use both motion controllers and a standard pad to play, both options feel unwieldy, with your hands often contorting into weird, unnatural shapes when using the (admittedly more immersive) motion controls. Movement is sluggish too, most likely to prevent motion sickness. *Resident Evil 7* this is not. Even the popular Butterfly Effect system isn't as effective here as in *Until Dawn*, as there are so few to actually trigger. You may play through the game in order to discover the full story, but there's very little reason to return after that. *The Inpatient* is certainly a strong move towards highlighting the impact of VR and its effectiveness within the Walking Simulator genre in particular, but unlike *Rush Of Blood*, it just doesn't deliver enough bang for your proverbial buck.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

DECISIONS, DECISIONS: While it's welcome to see *Until Dawn*'s Butterfly Effect return in full force, more varied options could have led to better replay value, particular as it's done in just over two hours.

VERDICT 5/10

A CLEVER HOUSE OF CARDS THAT QUICKLY TUMBLES





Above: Conversations can go in different directions, tugging at the 'red strings' of fate and putting the game's narrative on a different path. On a second playthrough you can explore different possibilities.

A COCKTAIL OF REFRESHINGLY ORIGINAL IDEAS

The Red Strings Club

In our favourite scene in *The Red Strings Club*, you take down a colossal multinational corporation using nothing but a telephone. You've already got your fingers on the threads of a secretive corporate scheme that may or may not end with everyone being brainwashed thanks to some fancy cyberpunk tech, and it is time to give those threads a final tug, untie the knot of conspiracy and bring it all crashing down.

With the help of an implant that lets you impersonate other people's voices, you punch in numbers on your keypad to call up execs, engineers and HR personnel, navigating a network of relationships with bluffs, lies and intel to manipulate them into revealing vital secrets. The hacker you are playing as never moves from the phone he's sitting in front of, yet the scene has a real sense of dynamism. Each new phone number you uncover, every new little detail you expose, is a mini-victory that makes you feel like a combination of quick-witted detective and devious hacker – albeit one that looks for exploits in human networks, rather than artificial ones – and builds momentum towards the game's climax. It's a fantastic idea, brilliantly implemented. It's just a shame there's not more of it.

The theme of manipulation and information gathering is explored in the two other mini-games that combine to make up the rest of *The Red Strings Club*. One sees you crafting biomechanical implants using a glorified pottery wheel, the other tasks you with mixing drinks that push your customers into certain emotional states, leaving them vulnerable to questioning – providing you pick the dialogue options that best exploit the state you've left them in.

There's a tactile feel to the former that's both relaxing and satisfying, and the game is smart enough to drop it before the novelty wears off. The drink-mixing mini-game, however, has the same sense of unrealised potential as the phone mini-game. As unscrupulous as it may be, playing with people's emotional states to get them tell you what you want to know is devilishly fun, but you feel like you've barely started to play with the system before it's all over.

It feels there's something bigger and more ambitious to be drawn out of the original and clever ideas this game introduces. A genre-defining detective game, perhaps. Still, let's not get too down on a game that leaves you wanting more. Along with the unique ideas, the game is well-paced, introduces us to some interesting characters and offers up some intriguing philosophical and political questions to chew on. We may be disappointed that there isn't more of it, and we may wish that some of the ideas had been pushed a little further, but that doesn't change the fact that what *is* there is great.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Spain
PUBLISHER: Devolver Digital
DEVELOPER: Deconstructeam
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Intel Pentium D 915 or equivalent, 1GB RAM, 400MB storage available
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: GODS WILL BE WATCHING



WORSE THAN: NIGHT IN THE WOODS

ENHANCED

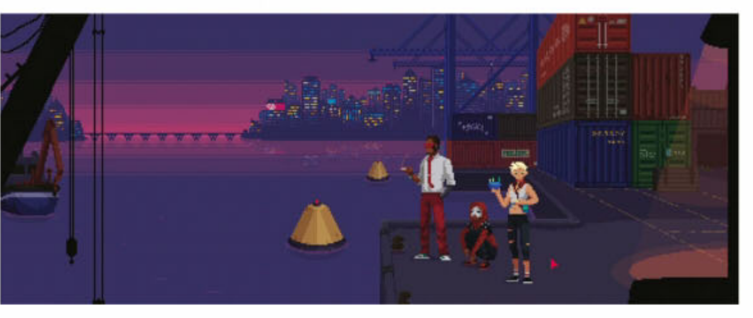
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

ON THE UP: Desconstucteam's second foray into the point-and-click genre after *Gods Will Be Watching* again showcases a willingness to experiment with new ideas and proves it's getting better. We can't wait for what's next.

VERDICT 8/10
A COMPELLING ADVENTURE FULL OF GREAT IDEAS



Above: Each drink moves the pink circle in a different direction. You choose what mix to put together to match one of the customers "Soul Nodes" and put them in an emotional state that leaves them vulnerable to some probing questions.



YOU KNOW WHAT THEY SAY ABOUT CURIOSITY?

Purrfect Date

What is it about videogames and their desire to sexualise just about everything imaginable, be it anime-eyed teenagers, sentient robots, dreamy daddies, undead creatures and even talking animals with a penchant for wining and fine dining? That's videogames for you, folks; they do it (or should we say, let you do it) all. It's fast becoming the signature of the flourishing visual novel genre; dating sims that look to subvert the somewhat perverse aspirations of their retro predecessors with sharp writing, unique visual styles and interesting observations on dating in the millennial world.

On the surface, *Purrfect Date* looks to be another in a long line. A visual novels crossed with a dating simulator, one specifically designed for those that have an unruly desire to see out their lives paw in paw with an adorable feline friend. That isn't – as we were somewhat elated to discover – all that's going on in this debut title from developer Bae Team; *Purrfect Date* comes equipped with the personality, heart and underlying mystery that so few of its closest competitors are ever truly able to deliver.

Beginning the game as a human scientist tasked with caring for an island populated almost exclusively by cats, it isn't long before you find yourself infected with a strange disease that transforms you into one of them. With no known cure for the ailment, you are tasked with working with local lab technician Professor Pawpur to figure out what's happening on the island, attempting to synthesise a cure and befriend a variety of cats along the way – the latter pretty integral should you happen to find yourself stuck in animal form for the rest of your days.

It's here where *Purrfect Date* reveals its true nature. While you can indeed pursue a variety of potential suitors, the situations and relationships that you develop are far more playful than overtly sexual. You get to choose how you want to spend your time too, pushing hours into romance, recon and research trees, each of which helps peel back more layers to the mystery. *Purrfect Date* also, thankfully, allows you to date all of the cats in a single playthrough in an effort to uncover as many new routes through your investigation. With the game switching you between a variety of new research partners at regular intervals you'll have plenty of time to scope out some of the stellar writing hiding away in the depths of the dialogue trees.

Purrfect Date is certainly fun, and a somewhat novel take on the genre, but that isn't to say it doesn't soon grow repetitive. As certain backdrops and scenarios begin to repeat, as themes begin to rear their head over and over, you might begin to tire of the premise, though the core experience offers just enough of a good time that you'll often struggle not to become utterly fascinated by what *Purrfect Date* has to offer.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Bossa Studios
DEVELOPER: Bae Team
PRICE: £7.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows 7, Intel Celeron N2830/ Intel Core 2 Duo T7300 / Athlon 64 X2 TK-55 or equivalent, 4 GB RAM, Intel HD Graphics 3000, 1 GB available space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

CUTE CAT: Each of the available feline dates have their own personalities, and it's a real delight to get to know each and every one of them.

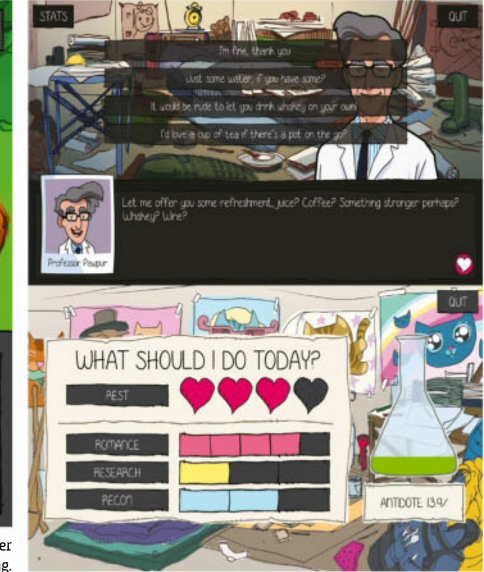


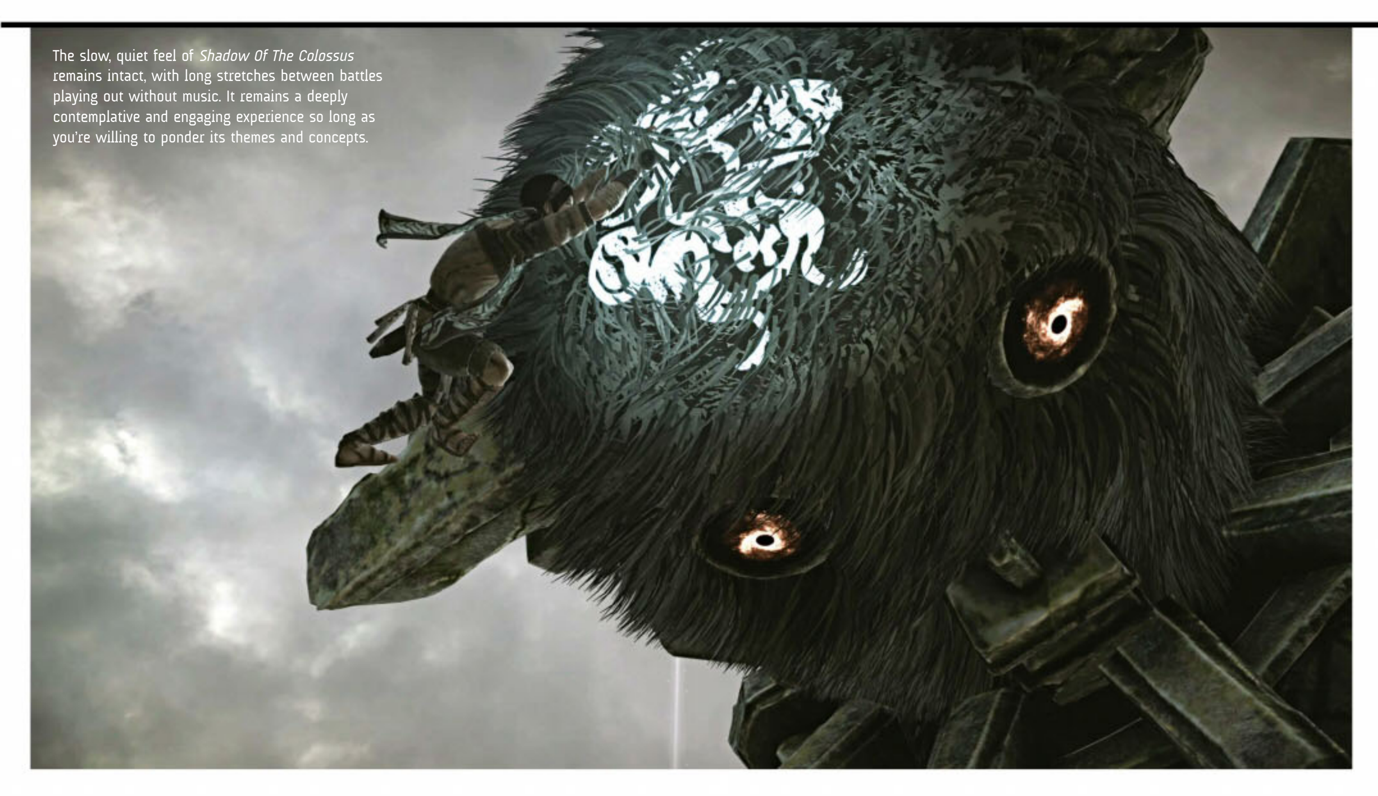


Above: The art style and scenario design will quickly become quite repetitive, though it's strange enough to hold your attention initially.



Above: Surprising everyone, this cat romance sim doesn't devolve into utter depravity. It is, for the most part, focused on the friendship side to dating.




The slow, quiet feel of *Shadow Of The Colossus* remains intact, with long stretches between battles playing out without music. It remains a deeply contemplative and engaging experience so long as you're willing to ponder its themes and concepts.

A TOWERING FEAT

Shadow Of The Colossus

***Shadow Of The Colossus* has lost none of its potency.** It's really quite incredible that 12 years since its release, in an age of procedurally generated universes, cities recreated street by street and performance capture that preserves every nuance of the human experience, this game about a single young man felling 16 hulking creatures remains so compelling to play.

And it's to the great credit of Bluepoint that the game feels so well preserved and recreated here. Some minor tweaks have been made to the overall experience, which we'll cover shortly, but for the most part this is a masterful remake. The world feels fuller, littered with more granular details than before, yet no less bleak and lonely. We had been concerned that the temptation to flood *Shadow Of The Colossus* with more flora and fauna would be too much to resist in this restoration, robbing the game of its melancholic core, but that simply hasn't happened. In fact, the presence of more detailed grass and trees, and more variance in colour in rockfaces and buildings has only added to the sense that this is an untouched, abandoned realm. Wander and Agro's presence here is an aberration.

We'll try to resist the urge to fall too deeply into re-reviewing Fumito Ueda's original concept and execution for *Shadow Of The Colossus*, because it's been well covered by this magazine and others over the years, and instead continue to concentrate on this shot-for-shot remake and what it brings or doesn't bring to the experience. And as we've said, detail is really the key addition.

The colossi, for instance, are more magnificent to behold than ever. The fur and stonework on their bodies is more detailed and clearly defined, the glowing sigils on their bodies radiant. Their majesty and elegance has been beautifully recaptured for 4K, allowing their scale and individuality to shine through. Taking them on remains a daunting and heart-pounding experience, even after years of facing them again and again.

The other significant change to the game is the new controller layout, which is optional as the original remains, but we would suggest is a major improvement, particularly if you're coming to this game for the first time. The more logical – for modern tastes – placement of the jump on X and grab on R2, with a roll move on Circle, makes life a great deal simpler.

The one area that this remake could perhaps have done with some care and attention, but which remains close to the original for better or worse, is the movement of Wander himself. He can jerk between creep and run with little elegance. There's no subtlety in the control here, which is a shame. The way he trips, stumbles and rights himself remains fantastic, but the lack of nuance in his movement speed really stood out against so many other changes.

And the camera, while it adheres to the original game's commitment to cinematic angles on the action at all times, feels like it's something you're trying to fight against. No great concern for those who know every inch of this world well, but a frustration all the same. We certainly won't argue that it makes for anything less than some stunning images in photo mode with much framing, however. But in the balance of things, against such a beautifully realised conversion of the original with the same feel and impact as ever, these feel like small complaints to make about a true classic.

SYNTHESIS

BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

IMMERSIVE SIM: In some ways *Shadow Of The Colossus* is similar to what we now call a walking simulator. That's perhaps because it shares some of the same feel and pacing of an immersive sim, combined with action RPG design.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: Japan, USA
PUBLISHER: Sony Interactive
DEVELOPER: Bluepoint Games, SIE Japan Studio
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

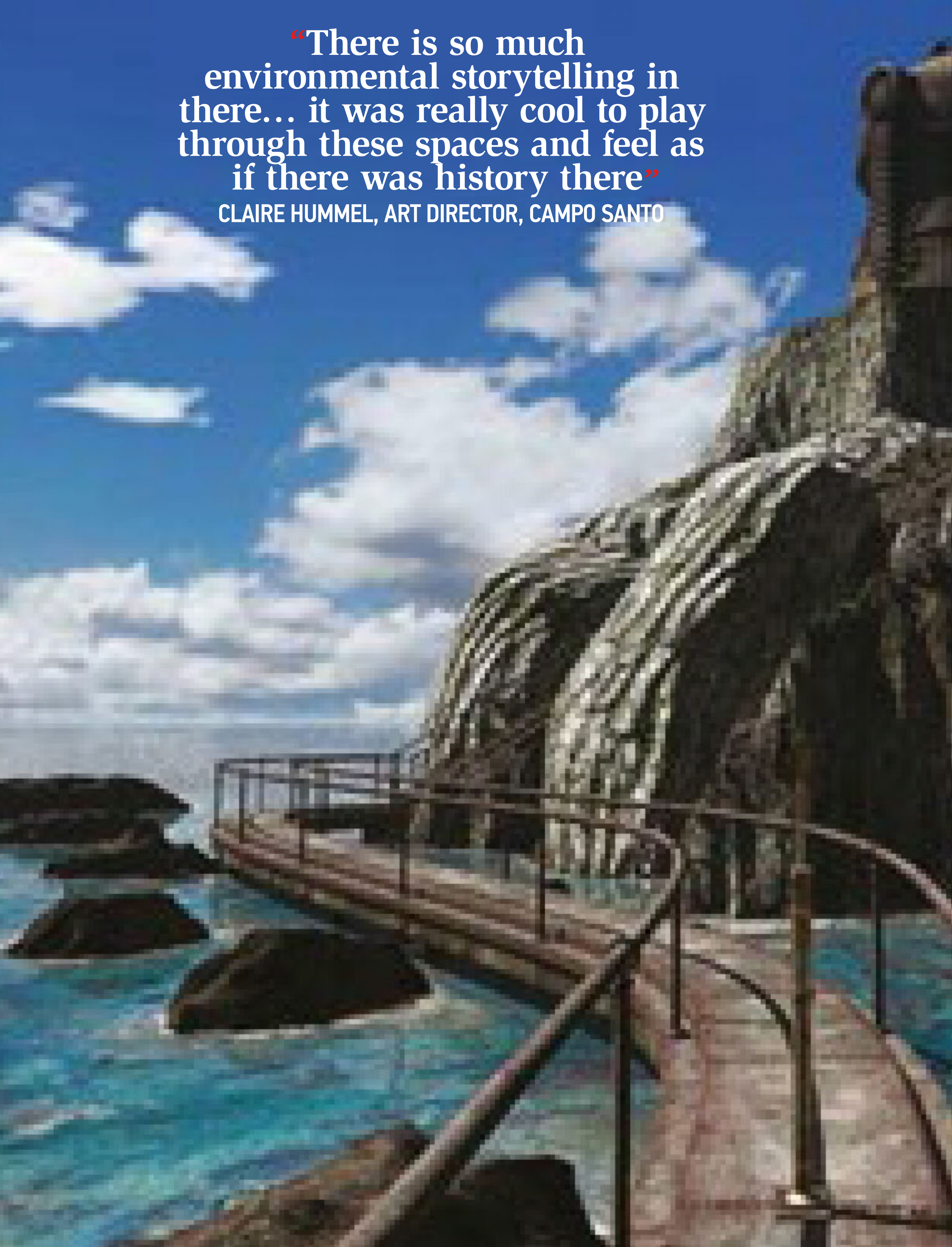
BETTER THAN: THE LAST GUARDIAN



WORSE THAN: TLOZ: BREATH OF THE WILD



VERDICT 9/10
A MARVELLOUS GAME, BEAUTIFULLY REMADE



"There is so much environmental storytelling in there… it was really cool to play through these spaces and feel as if there was history there"

CLAIRE HUMMEL, ART DIRECTOR, CAMPO SANTO



WHY I ❤...

RIVEN

CLAIRE HUMMEL
ART DIRECTOR, CAMPO SANTO

I'm going to go old school with Riven*: the sequel to* Myst*. It's probably the one game where even though I played it when I was so young, it's still just this visually striking game in terms of the gutsiness of the visual design; the shape language, the colours, the spaces you are exploring. It's all so iconic. It didn't look like anything that had come before it.*

Riven *is always haunting me when I'm working on my own games. Like, how can I make something that feels as good as* Riven *felt when I first played it? There is so much environmental storytelling in there, which I know is such a buzzword nowadays, but it was really cool to play through these spaces and feel as if there was history there – that there was a story going on that I'm not immediately privy to, but can pick it apart if I want to. I think about that, probably on about an hourly basis, while I'm working.*

RETRO

NO.197



DISCUSS | Have your say on all things retro and much more on our dedicated forum forum.gamestm.co.uk



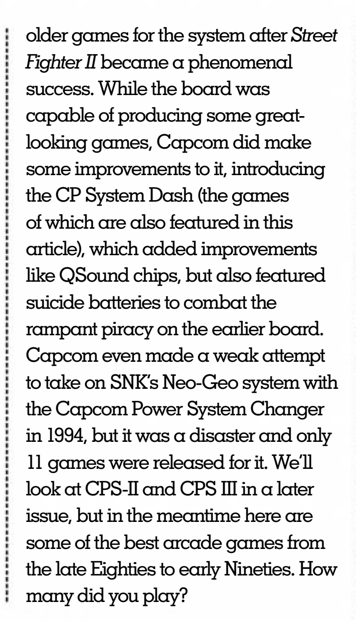
THE RETRO GUIDE TO...

CAPCOM CPS-1

With competition in arcade heating up, Capcom decided to up its game with a brand new arcade board. We revisit every game released for the popular system

IN THE EARLY Eighties, Capcom had huge hits with the likes of *1942, Ghosts 'N Goblins*, *Commando* and *Side Arms*. While these games were really popular for the company, they were quickly superseded by the introduction of Capcom's CPS board, which saw the arcade developer really start to move away from the pack.

Capcom's new board was designed to be able to run a selection of different games on it that would not only reduce hardware costs when making new games, but would be more enticing to arcade operators, too. The original CPS-1 board worked well for Capcom and it released 26 games for it across an eight-year period. The downside was that it was relatively easy to bootleg and Capcom itself began cannibalising many of its



older games for the system after *Street Fighter II* became a phenomenal success. While the board was capable of producing some great-looking games, Capcom did make some improvements to it, introducing the CP System Dash (the games of which are also featured in this article), which added improvements like QSound chips, but also featured suicide batteries to combat the rampant piracy on the earlier board. Capcom even made a weak attempt to take on SNK's Neo-Geo system with the Capcom Power System Changer in 1994, but it was a disaster and only 11 games were released for it. We'll look at CPS-II and CPS III in a later issue, but in the meantime here are some of the best arcade games from the late Eighties to early Nineties. How many did you play?



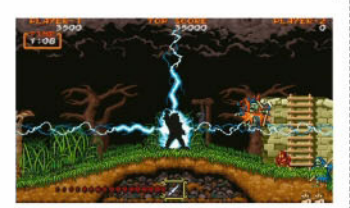


FORGOTTEN WORLDS 1988

SHOOTER

Capcom's very first CPS release proved that the developer meant serious business with its new hardware. It's an insanely pretty game that features magnificent-looking environments, lots of enemy sprites onscreen and some truly mesmerising bosses, some of which are several screens high in height. Mechanically, it's rather good as well with your flying spacemen being equipped with gigantic laser cannons that can be rotated around to give you full 360 degree movement (handy as enemies typically attack you from all sides). Defeated enemies drop Zenny (Capcom's fictional game currency) that can be used to buy various upgrades. Extremely popular, *Forgotten Worlds* was ported to numerous home systems, including Sega's Mega Drive.





GHOULS 'N GHOSTS 1988

PLATFORMER

This is how you make a great sequel. Capcom's follow-up keeps everything that made the first game so popular, but ranks everything up a notch, most notably in the graphics department. The visuals look wonderfully cartoon-like in places, with beautifully-animated sprites and gorgeous-looking stages that range from haunted graveyards to fire-ravaged villages. As with *Forgotten Worlds*, *Ghouls* also features some highly-memorable bosses, and although many of them aren't quite on the same impressive scale, they still pack a mighty wallop and can prove tough to defeat. Fortunately, Arthur is more than up to the task, having gained the ability to fire his various weapons upwards and downwards (more useful than it sounds) along with some swanky new armour that can be powered up to unleash devastating attacks. A sequel, *Super Ghouls 'N Ghosts*, appeared on the SNES in 1991.



DYNASTY WARS 1989

BEAT-EM-UP

This two-player scrolling fighter is quite unusual as the entire game takes place on horseback. Based on the Japanese manga, *Tenchi wo Kurau*, Capcom's game has you fighting through eight distinct provinces based on various battles depicted in the novel. It was followed by a sequel called *Warriors Of Fate* (this time catering for three players at once) in 1992.



WILLOW 1989

PLATFORMER

Licensed from George Lucas's moderately-successful film, *Willow* was one of two games Capcom created, with the other being an action RPG for the NES. While it features some enchanting sprite design and impressive bosses, *Willow* is a fairly conventional platformer, which probably explains why no one else bothered converting it to home systems.





UN SQUADRON 1989

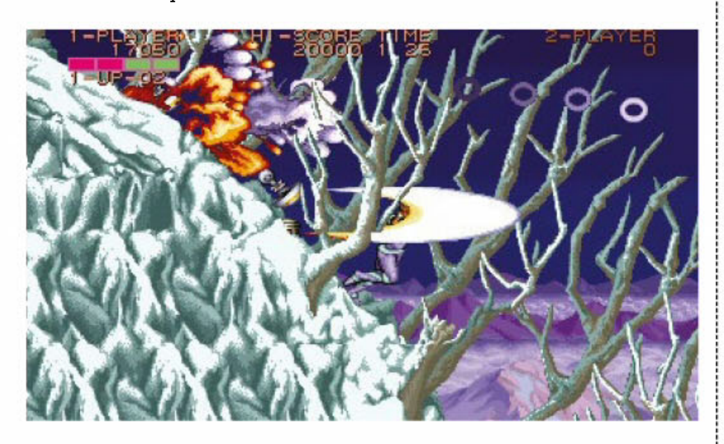
SHOOT-EM-UP

Known as *Area 88* in Japan, this satisfying shooter is actually based on a Japanese manga with the same name. Unlike many other shooters from the period, UN Squadron features an energy bar that decreases as your ship takes damage. Numerous special weapons can be purchased at the start of each stage, which is handy as many of the bosses are real pigs to take down.

STRIDER 1989

PLATFORMER

Spectacular is perhaps the best way to sum up Kouichi Yotsui's action platformer. The level design is exemplary, while the stages range from the snowy slopes of Siberia to the dinosaur-infested jungles of the Amazon. The bosses are a delight too, each one being more outlandish and over-the-top than the last, including a gigantic metallic gorilla and a pirate atop a flying skiff. It's Strider himself who's the star of the show, though, being an incredible, athletic one-man army who uses his laser sword to cut through enemies like they are butter.



FINAL FIGHT 1989

BEAT-EM-UP

Once planned as a sequel to the original Street Fighter, *Final Fight* would go on to become one of the most popular scrolling fighters of its era. It's essentially a game about crowd control, with you ideally teaming up with a friend to pummel, kick and grapple the scum of Metro City in search of the mayor's missing daughter. Each of the three available characters: Mayor Mike Haggar, Cody and Guy have their own distinct fighting styles and also have access to weapons that range from katanas to steel pipes.





1941: COUNTER ATTACK 1990

SHOOT-EM-UP

This is the third game in the 19XX series, which first started with 1942. It moves away from the Pacific Front of the earlier games to take place on the Western Front but it's otherwise business as usual with waves of planes to shoot down and various ground forces. While you can still loop-the-loop to avoid trouble it's also possible to create a lightning attack and you can pick up smaller ships to enhance your firepower. Only one port was available at the time for NEC's SuperGrafx.









MEGA TWINS 1990

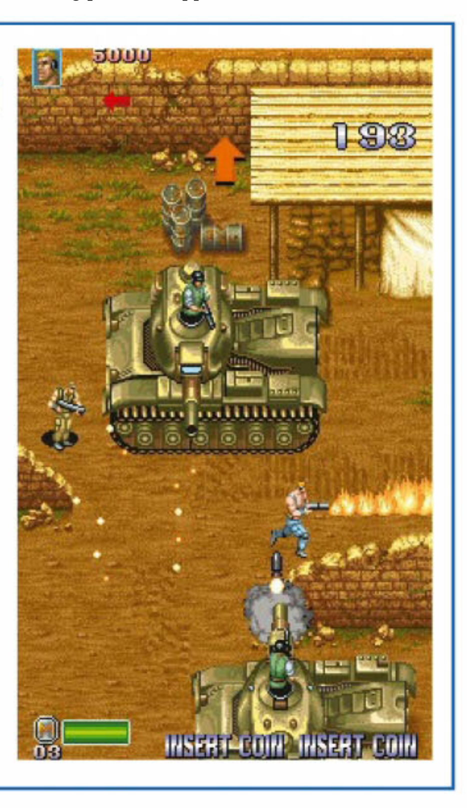
PLATFORMER

Known as *Chiki Chiki Boys* in Japan, Mega Twins is a charming, if rather conventional platformer that features colourful-looking levels, painfully cute bosses and some neat features that include magic bombs and bird hats that allow you to fly on certain stages. The twins themselves are fairly acrobatic, being able to cling onto and leap off vertical walls, while the game itself moves along at a fair old lick. Like many CPS games of the times it received numerous home ports, although interestingly, it never appeared on the SNES.

MERCS 1990

RUN-AND-GUN

It took Capcom five years to create a follow-up to Commando, but Mercs certainly didn't disappoint. Set in a more modern period, Mercs caters for three players (something that wasn't replicated on the home ports) and has some insanely powerful weaponry, including an assault rifle, flamethrower, and shotgun, all of which are a huge improvement on your base weapon. You also have access to the MegaCrush that acts as a smart bomb causing massive damage to anything onscreen. While many of the bosses look like conventional vehicles they take a huge amount of firepower to destroy, turning Mercs into a real credit eater. While it was ported to numerous systems at the time, the Mega Drive version is perhaps the best one as it features a brand new set of stages in its Original Mode.







MAGIC SWORD: HEROIC FANTASY 1990

PLATFORMER

Part platformer, part scrolling beat-em-up, Capcom's *Magic Sword* sees you battling through a number of fantasy environments and dealing with dragons, orcs, skeletons and all manner of fantasy creatures in your quest to reach the top of a 50-floor tower. The key difference here, however, is that while it caters for two-players you can receive additional support by rescuing locked-up prisoners who will then support you until you swap them for someone else or they take too much damage. It's a great conceit, so it's a shame only the SNES got a home port.



CARRIER AIR WING 1990

SHOOT-EM-UP

This spiritual successor to UN Squadron is quite unusual as it's one of the few CPS games that didn't receive a home conversion of any sort. This could be because it's a fairly average shoot-em-up that plays extremely similarly to Capcom's earlier shooter. Indeed, some of the stages feel like carbon copies of *UN Squadron*, making *Carrier Airwing* seem like an almost enhanced version of the classic shooter. It does score points for a great range of iconic ships, including the F-14 Tomcat and A-6E Intruder and we also love the fact that the officer who gives you mission briefings looks a lot like Sean Connery. It's not enough to stop *Carrier Air Wing* from rising above mediocrity, though.

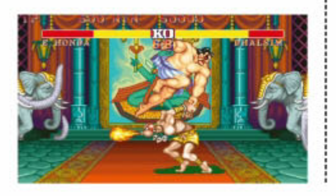




STREET FIGHTER II: THE WORLD WARRIOR 1991

FIGHTING

Capcom's first sequel to Street Fighter proved to be so popular that the company cannibalised many of its older CPS boards in order to keep up with demand. The ground-breaking fighter introduced gamers to some of the genre's most iconic characters, including Blanka, Chun-Li and Zhangif and dramatically improves upon Capcom's original game, by adding combos (created accidentally by Capcom) and took two years to create. While it feels a little sluggish today there's no denying that it remains a tremendously satisfying fighter with a selection of characters that some people have spent decades perfecting. To counter the demand for the game (loads of hacked version were released) Capcom released *Champion Edition* in 1991 and *Hyper Fighting* in 1992.





CREATING STRIDER

Kouichi Yotsui revisits his most popular game

Strider was a group project between Capcom and Moto Kikaku, how did you become involved?

At the time I was working for Capcom's first project team when a manga, Famicom and arcade collaboration project came up. I was placed in charge of the arcade version by Tokuro [Fujiwara], who was my manager at the time. When I asked him why he had chosen me, his simple reply was: 'You have really good negotiation skills.' I'm guessing he was expecting a lot of meetings with people outside Capcom.

Why do Strider's cut scenes feature multiple languages?

It was mainly because I wanted to give Strider a really exotic mood. When I was young there were no networks like we have today and it was only television that was able to show you all these exciting places from around the world. My impression was that the TV programmes imported from overseas were far more light-hearted and often featured adventures that saw explorers searching uncivilised jungles or going on ocean adventures. I was thinking: 'There is a world out there that we cannot communicate within the language we know!' I wanted Strider to be able to run around an immense world that was filled with marvels, and I based it on those early TV shows.

Where did the ideas for Strider's bosses originate?

Grandmaster Meio was actually inspired from an image I saw in JRR Tolkien's *The Lord Of The Rings*. I got the idea of Ouroboros from an old children's picture book that I used to enjoy, while Mecha Pon was simply my homage to the Toho movie character, Mechani-Kong. Lagoumechanic, on the other hand, was a little more convoluted. I saw it as an evolution of the dinosaurs on the Amazon level, but gave it the frame of a fowl. The attack where it reaches out at you with its huge claw represents a chicken scratching around for food. Finally, I based its head on the front of an F-16 fighter.

Why was Strider such a showcase CPS game?

For me, I believe that an arcade game's destiny is that it has to represent the drama and the story of what's happening on screen as effectively as possible. Actually, there's often no other escape route for the staff who are working on it, so the best way of making your point is by using visual expression. I always want to capture the dramatic side of things when creating games, and the new CPS board really enabled me to do that. I knew that my options were limited and that if I wanted to get the best out of both the game and the system I had to be as thorough as possible. When playing games there really isn't anything else to compare them to, so you would make them, fundamentally, 'all about the visuals'.





CONVERTING GHOSTS 'N GOBLINS

Ste Ruddy on porting the CPS hit to the C64

How did you get to work on the conversion?
Software Creations was doing a fair bit of work for US Gold and it was really just the next game I got following on from LED Storm. It was my last C64 game as I was doing more and more NES work.

Had you played much of the game beforehand?
Sadly not. I'd played *Ghosts 'N Goblins* to death but I hadn't seen *Ghouls 'N Ghosts* in the wild until well into the development of the game – by which time I was quite good at it, although I'm not keen on paying to play!

How much help did you receive from Capcom?
We didn't get any, really. We received a board from US Gold and that was it. Fortunately, it was one with a debug mode, so I do remember Andy Threlfall [the graphic artist] spending quite a lot of time staring at the test graphic pages. Apart from that it was just a case of playing the game over and over. It was a hard job but, you know, someone had to do it!

What were the trickiest parts of the game to replicate?
Well, technically, it was a full-screen colour scroll. Chasing the raster to update the colour was always fun, with an optimised sprite multiplexor supporting some of the massive sprites that the game used. But, to be honest, just fitting the sodding thing into the memory of the C64 was probably the trickiest part of the port.

What aspects of the port are you most proud of?
Getting a playable interpretation of the arcade *Ghouls 'N Ghosts* using a joystick.

And which parts do you wish you could improve?
The most annoying thing was the fact that we were rushed right at the end to get it out. This meant some silly bugs slipped through. I'd have loved just a couple more weeks to fix 'em.

How do you feel the port holds up today?
I think it's a pretty good interpretation of the arcade game. The graphics are good, it's playable and it has awesome music. That said, being a programmer, I look at it and think of all the things I could do better now.





THE KING OF DRAGONS 1991

BEAT-EM-UP

This fantasy-based, scrolling beat-em-up is clearly a dry run for Capcom's excellent Dungeons & Dragons games, which would appear on the CPS 2 system. Up to three people can play at once and five playable characters are available, including a Dwarf and Elf. Each hero has different attributes so the Dwarf has superb attack power with poor range, while the Elf is the complete opposite. The 16 available levels represent virtually every fantasy environment you can think of and typically finish with a ferocious battle against mayors that range from dragons to armoured orcs. Interestingly, only the SNES received a port of the game. While it only caters for two players it remains a decent alternative.





THREE WONDERS 1991

VARIOUS

This interesting offering from Capcom actually consisted of three completely different games. *Midnight Wanderers: Quest For The Chariot* is a fun, but rather difficult run-and-gun that has you controlling the Hobbit Lou (and his friend, Silva, in co-op mode) as he searches for his friend, Sena. The animation throughout is of an incredibly high standard, while there are plenty of power-ups to discover.

Next up is *Chariot: Adventure Through The Sky*, which continues the adventures of Lou and Silva and follows on directly from the first game (they've got the chariot, now see?). It's a fairly conventional Gradius-styled shoot-em-up that looks pretty, but doesn't really push the genre in any way.

The final offering is *Don't Pull*, a puzzle game in the style of *Pengo* that has nothing in common with the two other games. While the music is a little too twee for our tastes, the game itself is great fun with a large number of single screen stages to clear.





THE ANIMATION THROUGHOUT IS OF AN INCREDIBLY HIGH STANDARD, WHILE THERE ARE PLENTY OF POWER-UPS TO DISCOVER

CAPTAIN COMMANDO 1991

BEAT-EM-UP

Scrolling beat-em-ups were immensely successful in arcades, so it's little surprise that Capcom made so many of them to capitalise on that popularity. It stars Capcom's original mascot, who has teamed up with a motley team of bizarre characters, including a baby in a power suit. It's extremely similar to Capcom's earlier scrolling fighters, but includes things like dashing and guns and allows up to four players to compete at once. It was eventually ported to the PlayStation and SNES.









KNIGHTS OF THE ROUND 1991

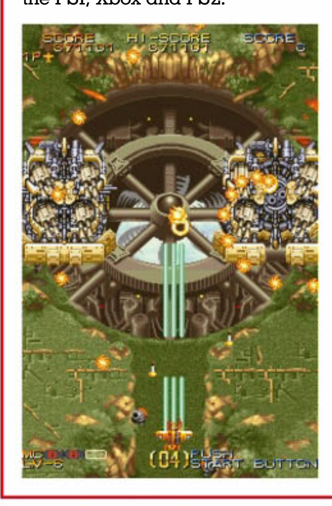
BEAT-EM-UP

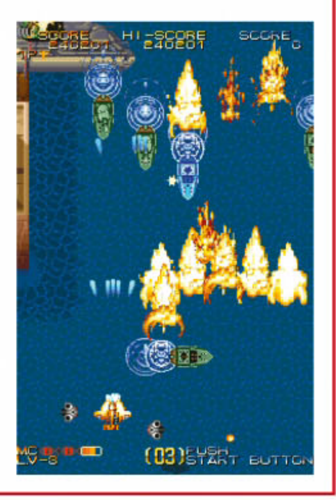
Capcom's next scrolling beat-em-up is loosely based on King Arthur and the knights of the round table and lets you play as Lancelot, Perceval and King Arthur himself. Each character has his own strengths and weaknesses, with Arthur being the most balanced and they gain more powerful armour as they level up in power. The game is otherwise similar to most other Capcom scrolling beat-em-ups, but does have a far bigger focus on blocking attacks with the aim of wearing down your opponent and using the powerful counterattacks the game offers, which adds some much needed strategy.

VARTH: OPERATION THUNDERSTORM 1992

SHOOT-EM-UP

This average shooter from Capcom feels very much like a missing 19XX game, albeit one set in the future. While it features similar waves of enemies and the familiar sets of red planes that must be shot down to earn power-ups, it sets itself apart by having sporadic bosses, sections that occasionally stop scrolling, three distinct weapons and useful pods that can be used to strategically block enemy bullets. It had no ports at the time, but eventually appeared on a collection for the PSP, Xbox and PS2.

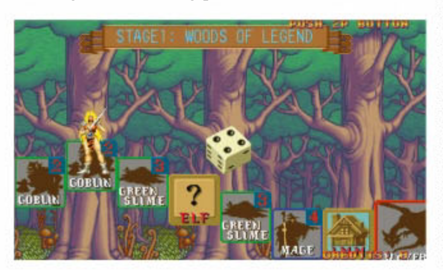




QUIZ & DRAGONS: CAPCOM QUIZ GAME 1992

QUIZ GAME

This interesting take on the quiz genre takes place in the world of Capconia and requires the four available heroes to battle various mythical creatures in order to save Capconia's Knowledge Tree. Taking place on a board, dice move the players around and each round typically ends in a question as the heroes battle numerous mythical monsters. While the original game features general knowledge questions an update for Capcom, *Classics Collection Vol.2*, featured a set of Capcom-based questions.



CADILLACS & DINOSAURS 1993

BEAT-EM-UP

This was the second game to use Capcom's enhanced CPS board, the CP System Dash, which is essentially a CPS-1.5. Based on the popular comic book *Xenozoic Tales*, it's a graphically-impressive brawler that includes neat mechanics like being able to use team attacks and the ability to use a variety of firearms and throwing weapons along with the typical melee options the genre offers. Dinosaurs are rampant throughout the game (one stage has you avoiding gigantic feet as foes swarm you on all sides) either acting as allies or foes and even the titular Cadillac pops up at one point, allowing you to drive through enemies as if they were paper.





THE PUNISHER 1993

BEAT-EM-UP

More CPS Dash-based action; this time based on the popular Marvel comic it has brilliant, comic-style presentation. It's an exceptionally brutal game with plenty of weapons for the Punisher and Nick Fury to use and has a surprisingly deep combat system. A cut-down port was released on the Mega Drive by Sculptured Software and now sells for hundreds of pounds.





SATURDAY NIGHT SLAM MASTERS 1993

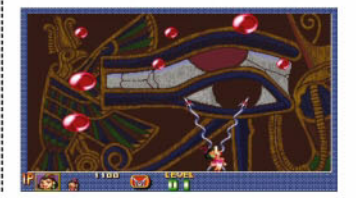
WRESTLING

This entertaining CPS Dash wrestling game is most notable for featuring Final Fight's Mike Haggar as a playable character. It's a surprisingly deep game with an array of special moves and the ability to fight both in and outside of the ring. While the single player mode is perfectly entertaining it's the Team Battle Royale that proves to be the most fun. Known as *Muscle Bomber: The Body Explosion* in Japan, it was ported to the SNES and FM Towns Marty.

PANG! 3 1995

PLATFORMER/PUZZLE

The third Pang! game is let down slightly by its horrible digitised pseudo-3D characters that take away a lot of the charm that made the earlier games popular. It's still good fun and adheres to the classic mechanics of the earlier games so you can team up with a friend to clear the screen of bubbles (which split into smaller ones when they get hit). Each character has their own unique abilities and the game dispenses with the world-travelling theme of earlier titles, instead setting the action in a large art gallery where you save numerous famous paintings.





BEHIND THE SCENES

SHADOW OF MEMORIES

The writer/producer behind Shadow Of Memories takes us behind the scenes of this daring classic from the early days of the PlayStation 2



Released: 2001
Format: PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC, PSP
Publisher: Konami
Key Staff: Junko Kawano (Writer, Producer)

LOOKING BACK OVER THE LONG HISTORY OF WOMEN IN VIDEOGAMES, ONE NAME THAT WILL LIKELY STAND OUT AS HAVING A PARTICULARLY SUCCESSFUL, IF LARGELY UNSUNG CAREER IS JUNKO KAWANO. Initially hired as an artist by Konami, Kawano would soon to go on to be the lead designer behind the classic PlayStation RPG *Suikoden* working with Yoshitaka Murayama, known to many as the RPG that let you recruit over 100 different party members. However, while many know her for the beloved RPG series on which she personally oversaw a total of five entries, another title Kawano led was *Shadow Of Memories*; the ambitious PlayStation 2 game that blended adventure, comedy, drama and detective work, all topped off with a decent helping of time travel. It's the kind of concept mix that would prove challenging to a developer working today and it was made no simpler by the hardware limitations of the time, yet Kawano and co. took it on.

Kawano was hired by Konami in 1993, and alongside fellow newcomer to the company Murayama, was tasked with creating a new RPG. Initially this RPG was to be released on an internally developed console that Konami was working on at the time, but once news of the upcoming Sony PlayStation made it to Konami HQ, the console was promptly scrapped. The RPG eventually became the original *Suikoden*, which released on the PlayStation in 1995 and became an ongoing franchise. However, though Kawano worked on a number of titles before she got to create *Shadow Of Memories*, the idea for her time-travel epic came about before she even joined Konami and created *Suikoden*. Compared to the well-tested RPG format, *Shadow Of Memories* was anything but, trying something new and inventive as it attempted to stand out from the crowd (which included *GTA III* and a new Metal Gear Solid). As a result Kawano had to release *TwinBee RPG*, a spin-off of the TwinBee shoot-'em-up series, and further cement her standing within Konami, before she could finally bring her vision of *Shadow Of Memories* to the world.

IT WOULD HAVE BEEN DIFFICULT TO MAKE THE GAME EXACTLY AS HOW I INITIALLY IMAGINED, UNLESS WE WERE DEVELOPING FOR THE PS3 OR PS4

Shadow Of Memories wasn't originally meant to be a PlayStation 2 title, origiinally destined for the PlayStation. After spending a few months tinkering around with a prototype of having a character simply walking around a self-contained area, Kawano deemed the PlayStation to be nowhere near as powerful as she needed it to be for such an ambitious game as *Shadow Of Memories*. In fact, not even the PlayStation 2 could properly create Kawano's vision for the game. As Kawano explains, "I chose the PlayStation 2 because I thought that I would be able



■ Upon dying or failing a mission, Eike will return to a waiting room of sorts, before starting again.





THE MANY FATES OF EIKE KUSCH

SHADOW OF MEMORY CONTAINS MULTIPLE DIFFERENT ENDINGS

OVER THE COURSE of *Shadow Of Memories*, you are asked to make many decisions that, at the time, don't seem all that important. However, depending on what choices you are making the game begins a process of choosing one of six endings based upon your actions. These range from 'good' to 'bad' and everything in between, but are generally equal parts bitter sweet and tragic, much like *Faust*, the play Kawano drew so much inspiration from. All the endings are vastly different from one another too.

One sees Eike saving the day, only to have his story end due to being killed by a drunk driver, another dishes out the revelation that two characters who live in very different eras were actually switched at birth, while one ending, despite being a generally positive finale for Eike, hints at two characters who do not know they are actually father and daughter possibly having a future romantic relationship. Additionally, if the player completes the game enough times to make all the in-game choices needed to view all six endings, two more endings named 'EX Endings' become unlocked.

These endings could perhaps be seen as the true conclusions to *Shadow Of Memories*, but sadly chances are that few gamers stuck around long enough to see them. Regardless, these endings not only complement the added layer of choice that Kawano was keen to inject into it; they also give you new reasons to revisit it. With a typical single play-through taking around seven hours, unlocking all eight of the endings makes *Shadow Of Memories* a lengthy time sink.



Eike's presence alone is enough to alter the future, like when he shows the townsfolk of 1580 a lighter.



Some players might recognise the actor playing Homunculus as Charles Martinet, the iconic voice behind Mario.





The fortune teller will regularly give Eike hints as to where his story might go. Her true identity is revealed in one of the eight endings.

WHAT THEY SAID...

> This definitely isn't a game for everyone, but if you're okay with a game that relies solely on its storyline and puzzle solving, then Shadow Of Destiny is a must-own title

IGN, 2001



After being pushed from a roof to his death, Eike must tie a rope to a rail prior to the incident, thereby saving his life.



to do more amazing things with it, but as with the PlayStation I felt it had limitations. However, it would have been difficult to make the game exactly as how I initially imagined, unless we were developing for the PS3 or PS4." With the newly released PlayStation 2 as the proving ground for *Shadow Of Memories*, Kawano began work on her most ambitious project yet.

Though Kawano could have gone down the route of making an action-packed adventure, *Shadow Of Memories* is instead an incredibly slow, intricate and thoughtful game, something that its fans and detractors alike both mention when giving their opinion on the title. In speaking about her intention behind the game, Kawano says, "I not only wanted to make a story with a strong plot, but also one that contained smaller stories within its overall narrative, a game that focused on human expressions and interactions, and one that allowed the player to choose their own path."

Shadow Of Memories (released as *Shadow Of Destiny* in the US) places the player in the role of Eike Kusch, a 22-year-old man who is fatally stabbed when leaving a cafe. After being revived by Homunculus, a mischievous genie-like character, Eike is given a chance to prevent his own murder. Eike is bestowed the Digipad by Homunculus, a device that allows him to time travel. Using this, Eike prevents his murder initially, but in doing so sets off a chain of events that forces him to keep preventing instances of his own murder, which leads him to time-travel to various eras across the span of 450 years.

When working on *Shadow Of Memories*, Kawano drew inspiration from a number of sources. Though she was generally inspired by time-travel films, she points to *Otogirisō* as her only gaming inspiration. Developed by Chunsoft and originally released on the SNES in 1992 (and later the PlayStation in 1999), *Otogirisō* is a visual novel that focuses on a stranded couple entering a haunted mansion. Later adapted into a film of the same name in 2001, though drastically different in terms of plot to *Shadow Of Memories*, Kawano drew inspiration from its strong plot and narrative progression. However, the biggest influence on *Shadow Of Memories* is neither a film or videogame. Instead, Kawano herself says, "The book that inspired me the most is Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust*".

Looking into Goethe's work clearly unearths some connections to *Shadow Of Memories*. *Faust* is a two-part tragic play that centres on God and the Devil making a bet to see if the Devil can turn Dr Faust, a man that lacks meaning in his life, to evil. With the wager made, the Devil visits Faust and promises him a moment of transcendence, something that Faust is eager to experience. If he does, Faust must serve the Devil eternally.

> **FAMILY NAMES ARE PRESENT THROUGHOUT THE HISTORY OF THE TOWN, WHICH NICELY CREATES A SENSE THAT LEBENSBAUM IS A LIVING, BREATHING CITY**

Though the story doesn't line up with *Shadow Of Memories* perfectly, there are some connections through various names and themes. For instance, character names such as Margaret and Wager are shared across both *Shadow Of Memories* and *Faust*; the Devil and the Homunculus share similar traits and intentions; both tales are strongly focused on the overarching theme of fate; both protagonists go on a journey granted to them by a mischievous being who has evil intentions, while they both have additional themes of doomed love. The latter is only applicable for some of the various endings available, but these direct connections lead to the fact that having prior knowledge of *Faust* is almost inherently a spoiler for *Shadow Of Memories*.

During Eike's travels he meets various characters, changes time beyond that of stopping his own murder, and begins to send ripples through time that have real and serious consequences. Though the story starts off quite straightforwardly, as the game progresses the player must hop between different times and juggle a number of potential scenarios. For Kawano, crafting the complex story to *Shadow Of Memories* never quite left her mind over the course of the two and a half years of development. She explains, "During the development period I always kept taking notes when thinking about the story. Whether I was at the office, at home or even when I was on holiday, I was always thinking about it!"

Shadow Of Memories was created in what could be described as a series of episodes, with each one focusing on Eike trying, in a very in-depth way, to prevent his own death. For instance, one episode sees Eike being stabbed by an assailant who was hiding behind a tree. To make sure that this event can never possibly happen, Eike goes back in time and effectively makes it so a statue, instead of a tree, is erected at the spot of his then-future murder. Another episode features Eike being killed by an antique vase that is thrown from a window of the local museum, which sends the player on a mission to destroy the murder weapon before it can even reach Eike's time. Though each episode is focused on preventing a certain instance of Eike's murder, it is never quite as easy as it sounds, and involves

FOR EACH TIME THE LANDSCAPE, LAYOUT AND VISUAL DESIGN OF LEBENSBAUM CHANGES, OFTEN QUITE DRASTICALLY

talking to the inhabitants of the town and finding important objects, often trading these items between characters who exist in completely different timelines and visiting eras at specific moments. This, on top of the ever-lingering countdown clock to Eike's murder, effectively creates a sense of urgency for the player.

One of the most unusual elements of *Shadow Of Memories* is its setting. While it is not uncommon for Japanese developers to place their games in a Western setting, Kawano decided to set it in a small fictional German town known as Lebensbaum. Directly translated from German as 'Tree of Life', the town is quaint, nicely presented, and filled with a whole host of characters who go about their daily lives that the player can interact with, similar to what Kawano achieved with *Suikoden*'s towns, but evolved somewhat. While some of the characters you meet along the way are merely decoration for the town, most NPCs who inhabit Lebensbaum will end up having an influence on the story in one way or another. As *Shadow Of Memories* deals with time travel, the player will also start to realise that various family names are present throughout the history of the town, which creates a sense that Lebensbaum is a living, breathing city.

However, despite the unusual setting being something of a curiosity, in hindsight Kawano is unsure if she made the right choice. As Kawano says, "Looking back, making the setting a German city may not have been a good way to commercialise it across the world. I was concerned about this afterwards, which is perhaps why my later time-travel title, *Time Hollow*, is set in Japan."

As *Shadow Of Memories* takes place entirely within the city walls of Lebansbaum, Kawano and her team focused on making sure the city felt realistic and that certain areas looked iconic enough that the player would grow used to navigating the many narrow streets of the city. After all, outside of exploring a few locations during episodes, the vast majority of gameplay takes place out in the city, and Kawano wanted the city itself to be as much of a recognisable character as the many NPCs that are encountered. A map of Lebensbaum is always accessible for the player too, and with a cafe, church, antique shop, museum, market, city hall, bakery and fortune teller available as locations within the game, Kawano and her team created a strong sense of geography within *Shadow Of Memories*.

The player can visit four different time periods: 2001 (when the game is set), 1979/80, 1902 and 1580-84. For each time the landscape, layout and visual design of Lebensbaum changes, often quite drastically. This can range from buildings present in 2001 not having being built by 1980, the town being lit only by candlelight in 1580, to the northern, western, southern and eastern gates of the city being rather rudimentary in 1902 compared to their modern-day counterparts. However, the most interesting change that is noticeable across all times is the use of colours to convey different eras. Kawano explains her reasoning for this, saying, "To express to the player that they are in a different time was a challenge, beyond merely just telling them. Initially, each era of Lebensbaum was created with a full colour pallet. It was only until near the latter half of development that I wanted to show the difference in each era in a much stronger way. I did this by changing the colour pallet for each time. Of course, some of the staff got mad because their colourful visuals were lost, but I wanted to make this surprise a part of the game."

This leads to the visuals in 1902 being entirely black and white, while the overall colour tone of 1580 is a mixture of brown and yellow, as if the player is looking at an old, discoloured photograph. Despite these visual differences from era to era, Eike's character model remains in full colour throughout the duration of the game, further cementing the fact that he simply doesn't belong in the various times he is visiting. It is a subtle addition, but one that is played off rather well.



Though not all times are freely available at first, eventually Eike can time travel at will to multiple eras.

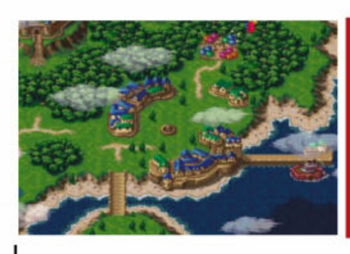


WHAT THEY SAID...

The eye candy is as sweet as anything you'll find in the Dreamcast's Resident Evil: Code Veronica. If you like the graphics then you will love the nicely executed and well-animated FMV sequences

Game Revolution, 2001

> A GAMING EVOLUTION
Chrono Trigger > Shadow Of Memories > Time Hollow



Chrono Trigger used time travel to allow the player to visit seven different eras, during which you can recruit new allies.



Time Hollow allowed the player to, with the use of the Nintendo DS stylus, directly create time portals during gameplay.



Shadow Of Memories is both jam-packed with story and content while also being quite a short experience, much to the disappointment of some players. However, if you were to complete the game once, the full *Shadow Of Memories* breadth of narrative on offer has simply not been experienced. The core game might not take long to complete, but to see everything from the different choices Eike can make on his journey to the multiple endings to unlock, *Shadow Of Memories* is a title that keeps paying off if you are willing to put the time in. Due to the technical and time constraints involved, there were elements to the game that Kawano wanted to but couldn't add to the already overstuffed final product.

Kawano outlines what else she wanted to add to the game: "Looking back, I really wanted to make the basement in the Alchemists house into a fully explorable map, as I wanted to set some kind of mission there. I also wanted to add some more drama scenes to the game, especially set in the church. I also think I could have expanded the game to makes Eike's story longer."

In 2008, Kawano wrote and designed what many consider to be a spiritual successor to *Shadow Of Memories*. The title is *Time Hollow*, and it was released on the Nintendo DS to an above-average reception. Once again involving the theme of time travel, it may be the closet anyone will ever get to a true sequel to Kawano's prior time-travel outing. Kawano speaks about her work on the game by saying, "In developing *Time Hollow*, we created a game that allows players to freely change the past simply with a touch of the pen. Every game creator wants the player to taste a new experience, and because *Time Hollow* is mainly based on visuals with text like an animation, the presentation and gameplay is totally different."

With Kawano's interest still clearly swirling around the theme of time travel, it begs the question that die-hard fans of *Shadow Of Memories* have been asking since its release: will there ever be a true sequel? Though looking very unlikely at this point with the current state of Konami, Kawano does address the idea of a sequel. "After the release of *Shadow Of Memories*, there were discussions that occurred several times. However, sadly the timing didn't work out, so it did not happen. But if I was to make it now, there may not be any new surprises to add that the player hasn't already seen in *Shadow Of Memories*."

Even to this day, *Shadow Of Memories* divides opinion. While perhaps its pace and English voice acting are areas in which the game can stumble at times, it still stands as one of the most memorable titles from the early days of the PlayStation 2, a time when Sony's follow-up to the original PlayStation was planting its flag down firmly into the soil of gaming history. It is a title that deals with a wide array of heavy subject matter, pushes the new-found power of its native console to the limit, and does it all within a game world that feels real, lived in and historic. *Suikoden* may be the game that Kawano is remembered for in the minds of most gamers, but in 2001 she released something arguably more daring, inventive and challenging than anything released in that famed RPG series.



A LONG SHELF LIFE

SHADOW OF MEMORIES ISN'T JUST A PLAYSTATION 2 TITLE

WHILE SHADOW OF MEMORIES released on the PlayStation 2 in 2001, the game has had an unusually long shelf life for a title that, outside of its hardcore fans, has been largely forgotten by many. In 2002, an Xbox version was released exclusively for Europe. The same year a PC version, ported by Runecraft, was released for both Europe and the US. Then, a whole eight years after it was initially released, a PSP port made its way to Japan in 2009, followed by Europe in 2010. Apart from the PSP version, each version is near identical. For the PSP port, the voice work in the game was recast and rerecorded, the DigiPad is strangely renamed the Z-Pad, more NPCs were added to Lebensbaum and a better save feature was implemented.



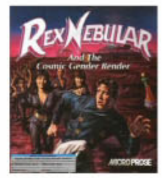


INTERVIEW

BRIAN REYNOLDS

As the lead designer on Civilization II, Reynolds was a significant part of MicroProse's move away from simulation and towards strategy games. We speak to him about his career at the historic studio

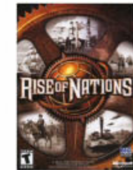
SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY



Rex Nebular [1992]
Lead programmer



Civilization II [1996]
Lead designer



Rise Of Nations [2003]
Lead designer

WHAT WAS YOUR experience, and how did you come to work for MicroProse?
I had done a lot of programming work on my own when I was young and even sold one game to a magazine – I made the stunning sum of $200 – but I graduated college with a degree in history and philosophy. My first full-time job, with MicroProse, was actually as a programmer though, and from May '91 when I started, until summer 1993, when we started on *Colonization*, I was working mostly as a programmer.

How did you come to get a job at MicroProse as a programmer, considering your degree was in history and philosophy?
Since I'd been programming obsessively all through high school – and my summer jobs from age 16 onwards were all programming jobs – so I had plenty of 'real world' programming experience. I'd actually originally thought I'd get a computer science degree – I wanted to make compilers for Microsoft – but back in those days personal computers were so new that academic CS programs frankly weren't keeping up with the times. When I found myself being paid to tutor someone through a CS class, two semesters higher than I was allowed to take myself due to 'prerequisites', I decided I'd rather get a degree in "something interesting". Impulsive youthful decision. That happened to work out. But since I was confident in my programming skills, once I decided I wanted to get into the videogame industry, I made myself a demo of a game, mostly in assembly language I think – it wasn't a full game, more of a vertical slice, but you could see wizards and dragons animating around and shooting fireballs and stuff, on a map, and there was music and so forth. I did every bit and byte of it myself so it became my electronic résumé.

I TOOK THE CIV PROTOTYPE INTO MY OFFICE AFTER WORK THINKING I'D JUST PLAY FOR HALF AN HOUR – AND THE NEXT THING I KNEW, IT WAS 2AM!

Did you have an ambition to move beyond programming and into game design? Was that how you saw your path?
[Laughs] At the time I was applying to the industry I didn't know there was a *difference*! Only when I got to MicroProse and discovered that, with the sole exception of Sid Meier himself, there were no programmers that actually did game design – and vice versa – did I realise there was an important distinction. It took me about three years to break through that barrier and get involved in both, and by that time, yes, I saw my path as game design.

The industry was still relatively young in those days. Did it feel like a viable option to turn your hobby into a career?

It never occurred to me it could be a career when I was in high school and college. I always thought if you studied computer science that your high-end 'real' job was making compilers or something. But when I was in graduate school and realising I wanted to do something different than teaching philosophy and history, I happened to finish *Ultima VI*, and all these names started to scroll by on the screen in the credits – remember, cinematic-style scrolling credits were pretty new to games back then. And I was sitting there thinking, "Wow, that's a lot of names. These people must get *paid* to do this. Hey, I know something about computers, I bet *I* could do this…" This happened in late 1990, that it first occurred to me that this could be an actual career for me, and literally six months later I was working full-time for MicroProse.

COLONIZATION WAS PERHAPS THE BEST IDEA I EVER HAD, BUT MY ABILITY TO EXECUTE ON IT WAS THE WEAKEST OF MY CAREER

Your earliest titles were adventure games, but it became clear later on that strategy was your core interest. How did you find working on those early titles?

Those were the games where I worked as a programmer rather than a game designer. I was mostly implementing an engine and tools to make adventure games possible. I had some input on the game itself, as would any productive team member, but I wasn't fundamentally doing design work. It was when we started *Colonization* in 1993 that I started doing game design as a major part of my role.

We've spoken to developers involved with *Civilization* before, and they tell us Sid asked each developer what their thoughts were. Did you give much feedback?

During the development of the original *Civilization*, I was a pretty junior programmer, and I wasn't on the *Civ* team, but Sid used to give anybody around the office who asked a copy of the current prototype so that they could play. I remember the first time I played a *Civ* prototype, probably around August '91, I took it into my office after work thinking I'd just pop it in for half an hour until I went home – and the next thing I knew it was 2am and I was the only one left in the building! Sid would listen patiently as young folks like me would blather their ideas or complaints about the game and I certainly remember delivering such ideas, but I imagine they were mostly pretty minor things like "maybe ships should blah blah blah" or whatever – nothing significant and I have no idea or memory of whether or not Sid used a single one of them.

Why did Sid not decide do the sequel, and how did you come to work on it as game designer? Did he still provide advice and assistance in any way?

I think Sid felt like *Civilization* was probably the coolest game he'd ever made, but it was all-consuming for him and he was ready to do something else. Meanwhile company execs and marketing folks were trying to get him to do a sequel. There was a point where it got decided that strategy games in general were more strategic (so to speak) to the company than they'd been before – MicroProse and later Spectrum HoloByte were both originally known more for 3D military simulators. And so *Colonization* happened to fit right into those developments pretty well – it was like having a *Civ* sequel, and it was a strategy game, and Sid didn't have to work full-time on it.

Once *Colonization* was successful enough, folks thought it was good enough that it meant they might be able to trust me with *Civilization* itself if Sid was okay with it. I think Sid mostly thought "thank God, now they won't keep asking me to do it". We had a big sit-down with Sid before the project started and kind of went over the overall goals and ideas and "my personal motto", et cetera. But partially because I was living in England that year and partially because Sid had his own other projects he was passionate about and partially probably because he mostly trusted me and wanted to give me a chance to do my own thing, he mostly left me to my own devices.







■ Reynolds contributed to a number of games dating right back to the origins on MicroProse and many of its most successful releases.



■ With the advent of mobile gaming, Reynolds became a key figure in the development of *DomiNations*, an Age Of Empires-style free-to-play game.



A few years after helping to found Firaxis, Reynolds and a few other MicroProse developers left to found Big Huge Games, with *Rise Of Nations* being their first game.



Reynolds was the lead on Firaxis Games' first project, the answer to the question "what happens next?" after reaching end-game in *Civ*.

Colonization was an opportunity to test Reynolds with a title like *Civ*, but without the pressure of a full sequel.



I'd occasionally ask a question or a piece of advice, that was about it.

What sort of aspects of the game did you feel were the most important to change or improve?

My personal motto for the project was that I didn't want to be "the guy who broke *Civ*" – by which I meant that I didn't want there to be even a single feature that someone could point to and say "that was worse than the original *Civ*". And it had to *feel* completely like playing *Civilization*, just even better. So every single feature I tried to hold up against that standard – it had to capture all the best parts of the original and where possible make some improvements. I think the areas I thought most important to improve upon were combat, diplomacy and AI, and in all of those cases I was mostly responding to the wealth of player feedback we had on the original game.

How did you react to the negative attitude of Spectrum HoloByte? Why didn't they believe in the product?

It was weird and hard to understand, at least the *level* of negative attitude they seemed to develop. Part of it was a bit of "not invented here" by their marketing folks, who were by now all based in California at the Spectrum HoloByte headquarters, and seemed much more prone to "drink the Kool-Aid" of the game being developed in-house there. But marketing guys are marketing guys and I heard the 38,000 [sales estimate] thing right from the CEO's mouth, which – in hindsight at least – sure seems like breathtaking incompetence to me. I'd have thought investing in marketing spend based on the game doing at least the same 300,000 that *Colonization* had done just over a year ago would have been kind of a no-brainer reasonable decision, especially since sequels usually do better than spinoffs, and the original *Civilization* had done over 800,000 units.

MAKING WIZARDRY BETTER

> "The funny thing is that most of the time I was there, MicroProse considered itself a big name in *simulation* games, and thought of strategy games as a little side thing. But it was a *great* place to work as far as the creative environment and atmosphere and stuff – especially for my first game industry job, when I was like a kid in a candy store."

Incidentally, it's absolutely no exaggeration to say that this issue was one of the key reasons that Sid and Jeff and I left MicroProse to found Firaxis – and Firaxis has gone on to be a very successful and long-lived studio, while Spectrum HoloByte basically went bankrupt in the next few years, so you could say that they effectively killed the golden goose. The *Civ* brand had hundreds of millions of dollars of sales left in it!

When it came to developing *Colonization*, where did the overarching idea come from? It seems like quite an unusual era to focus on?

Well, that may be one of those rare things in my career that I can take complete credit for – the *idea* for *Colonization* was mine. When I was getting my history degree, the whole Age of Discovery was one of my favourite periods in history, and so when I started looking for some kind of topic to do a strategy game on, a game about colonising the New World was my best and favourite idea.

Now, in terms of executing on the idea, the broad idea was to kind of hybridise two of Sid's best games – *Civilization* and *Railroad Tycoon* – and in the end the balance was strongly toward the *Civ* side, though you can see the *Railroad Tycoon* influence in the trading side of the game.

Of course, I was a brand new designer at that point, so while on one hand this was perhaps the best *idea* I ever had, my ability to *execute* on it was the weakest of my career! So I feel like *Colonization* kind of grabs the player really strongly for the first hour or so and is really fun, but then it kind of bogs down and peters out as you go along. It's an irony of the entertainment industry – but perhaps a necessary irony – that you have to use your best idea to break in, but at the time that you have the least ability to deliver on it.



NBA Jam on consoles featured a number of hidden characters, including President Bill Clinton and Atari VP Leonard Tramiel.

GAME CHANGERS

NBA JAM

Developer: Midway, Iguana (Consoles) **Publisher:** Midway (Arcades), Acclaim (Consoles)
Released: 1993 (Arcades), 4 March 1994 (Mega Drive, SNES, Game Gear) **System:** Arcade, Mega Drive, SNES, Game Gear

How fun and flamboyance trumped realism and rules to land a slam-dunk for arcade sports games

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO the arcade action sports game? We're not sure, but it's a question that seems to pop up every now and again. As ever, the indie scene is keeping the dream alive as best it can, but the likes of EA and 2K, the licence-holders for the biggest sports associations, don't seem all that interested in supporting easy-to play, high-octane sports endeavours anymore. And that's a shame, because there was a little period there when arcade action was the pinnacle of sporting excellence. On top of the pile was *NBA Jam*.

Let's not beat around the bush on this one, *NBA Jam* was a phenomenon. Estimated figures put its console sales figures at around 3.44 million across the Mega Drive and SNES, which would make it a better-selling game than *Star Fox* or *F-Zero*. It's US sales figures alone put it in the top five best-selling games on Sega Genesis (to use the local name for the console). In arcades, it's believed that *NBA Jam* generated $1 billion in revenue. That's a serious amount of quarters.

PUSH PLAYERS AROUND, THROW YOUR ELBOWS, DO WHATEVER… THE GAME COULDN'T GIVE A DAMN

So the raw financial figures are impressive and it probably goes without saying that it was probably the most successful licensed sports title released on consoles to that point. That, however, is not why we would consider *NBA Jam* to be a game-changer. That honour comes from how it managed to popularise the sport of basketball and bring coach co-op sports action to a wider audience than ever before.

The licences were a big draw. *NBA Jam* wasn't the first sports game to feature real-world sports stars, but it featured a lot more of them and achieved far closer approximations of their likenesses than most. It also had

ALL ABOUT THE TRASHTALK

HOW NBA JAM FOSTERED A COMPETITIVE SPIRIT



VIOLENT PLAY

★ There are no fouls given for pushing or throwing elbows in *NBA Jam*, which for anyone familiar with the sport would be egregious in the extreme. As a result, you can become quite aggrieved with your mistreatment in the game, building up that adversarial experience rather nicely.



HE'S ON FIRE!

★ The burning basketball mechanic of the game, which kicks in if one team scores three unanswered baskets, added some great colour to the game, but it also rubs it into the face of your opponent. They've just conceded at least six points in a row and now you've got superpowers as well!



CATCHPHRASES GALORE

★ One of the great joys of playing local multiplayer sports games is the trash talking. *NBA Jam* really built on that with its commentary. Phrases such as Boomshakalaka, He's On Fire and Slam-a-jamma were basically giving you ammo to fling at your friend as you played.

unique stats for each player, which was a relatively rare thing (most sports games only had overall team stats), helping to push us down the path to individual player stats and performances that has since become the mainstay of all sports games.

It's also notable that Michael Jordan, blowing up as one of the greatest sports stars of all time as the Chicago Bulls rose in prominence in the early Nineties, wasn't in the game. In an age before sports organisations tied up the image rights of all of its major stars, Jordan opted out of appearing in the game, but it seemingly made no difference. While FIFA missing out on a player such as Lionel Messi or Cristiano Ronaldo, or Madden missing out on Odell Beckham Jr. would be considered a body blow to those titles today, *NBA Jam*'s appeal was proven through its gameplay and, frankly, many didn't even care who the players were.

Which brings us to another of the genius moves Midway made in developing *NBA Jam*: not really worrying about the rules of the game. There are only two types of foul in *NBA Jam* – shot clock violations and goal tending. So, you get penalised for not shooting fast enough and stopping a clear scoring shot. That's it. Push players around, throw your elbows, do whatever and the game couldn't give a damn. This simplification of the rules of the game meant that anyone could play and enjoy *NBA Jam* without really having to understand anything about the real-world sport. Take the ball, pass it if you absolutely have to and put the ball through the hoop. That was about all you had to know when attacking, while defending was what we would think of as man-defence, not that such terminology or tactical awareness was really necessary in a two-on-two game.

Which was also kind of a brilliant move. Four players on a court is not only very asset-efficient and less demanding on a game engine, it's also very accessible for anyone looking to emulate the experience on their local court. Playing two-on-two games is pretty much

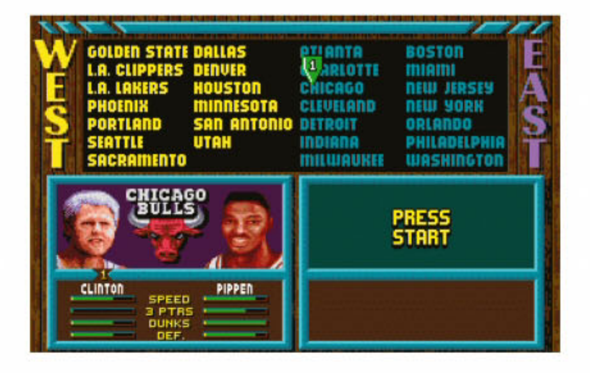
KEY FACTS

- *NBA Jam* creator Mark Turmell has admitted he has included code that made the Bulls miss late-game shots in tight matches against his beloved Detroit Pistons.
- Ed Boon has said in the past that there was almost a Mortal Kombat court hidden in *NBA Jam*.
- The theme music of the game is thought to be inspired by Parliament-Funkadelic, whose member George Clinton was also an unlockable character in the game.

the most common way of playing basketball for fans around the world. And when we play that way, we're not too worried about the strict rules of the game or minor infractions. All we care about is who scores and how spectacularly they can do it. *NBA Jam* embraced that ethos and turned everything up a few extra notches.

The insanity of *NBA Jam*, while perhaps tame by the standards of arcade action games since, elevated things further. The 'On Fire' mechanic of having the ball ignite once one team scored three times in a row; the majestic, long-distance dunks players were capable of; and the overall speed of the game and how violent it could become all fed into the fantasy of playing professional sports. We often talk about 8-bit and 16-bit games as leaving space for our imaginations to fill in the gaps, and in some ways *NBA Jam* allowed our imaginations to take flight with its depiction of basketball.

NBA Jam wasn't tied to being a realistic depiction of the sport of basketball and that's what made it so successful. It embraced fun and competitive play above all other things and it showed that simplification and exaggeration were fruitful paths for making complex sports work on limited hardware. It was a triumph from beginning to end and we would love to see its like again.

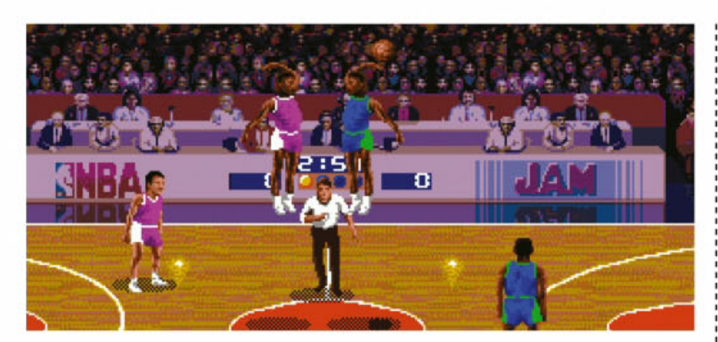




GAME CHANGERS

TEN OF THE BEST ARCADE SPORTS GAMES

THEY PUT ACTION OVER ACCURACY AND RIOTOUS FUN BEFORE THE RULES



NBA JAM (1993)

A pioneering game for arcade sports titles, *NBA Jam*'s simplification of basketball's rules and gameplay made it accessible to all gamers, regardless of their basketball knowledge, while also making it easy to play for anyone who was new to the realm of digital sports altogether. Its high-octane gameplay made sure that once you started playing, you would be hooked within minutes. While many arcade action games would follow, this remains one of the best of all time.



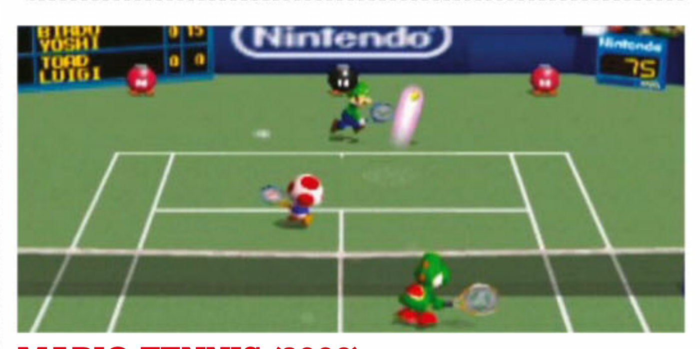
FEVER PITCH SOCCER (1995)

While *Fever Pitch* didn't have licences for real-life professional players, it compensated for that fact by giving its international teams a selection of fictional superstar players, each of whom had special abilities. The better the rating of the team, the more stars you would have. Those superstar players varied in effectiveness, from strikers who could hit flaming shots at amazing speeds, to players who could put incredible spin on the ball, and players who were particularly adept at diving.



SUPER PUNCH-OUT!! (1994)

Nintendo's SNES follow-up to *Punch Out!!* on NES combined a great appreciation for boxing while also playing around with the rules of the ring enough to keep you dancing on your toes. The outlandish cast of characters you had to fight, plus a seeming disregard for weight classes, meant that the challenges thrown at you could be immense. So long as you ducked and dodged your way through a bout, however, you should have managed to remain unscathed.



MARIO TENNIS (2000)

Mario's forays into sports have been mixed in their effectiveness, but his tennis releases have been among the more consistent. We have a soft spot for *Mario Tennis: Power Tour* on GBA, but we've plumped for the N64 release. The character selection was broad and offered a variety of subtle differences in approach as you would expect, while the power ups (like Banana Peels and Lightning Bolts, classic karting fare) were fun and not too overpowered or intrusive, which has happened in a few releases.



SEGA SOCCER SLAM (2002)

Very much in the Mario school of how to approach the beautiful game, we'd pick Sega's take on the sport over the plumber's attempt any day of the week. The main reason was the tight four-versus-four structure (which included the goalkeepers). This kept matches from being too hectic on screen with all the skills and crazy moves. The power strikes were enjoyable and not crazily overpowered, while the character design was a lot of fun. It's still a great game to pick up and play in local multiplayer.



3 ON 3 NHL ARCADE (2009)

This release came as something of a surprise from EA, who had not shown much interest in releasing this kind of light sports title for a little while, even less so as a digital-only game. However, here it was and what a fantastic little ice hockey experience it was too. Demos on *NHL 11* and *NHL 12* teased its fun design, stripping down the rules and offering a 'first to' scoring system to add to the tension as you play. It's exactly the kind of bite-sized sporting game you want to play with friends after a night out.



NBA STREET VOL. 2 (2003)

Picking up the baton from *NBA Jam*, EA's Street series has covered various different sports with some mixed results. We were never massive fans of the intepretations of football or American football, but perhaps because of the heritage of *NBA Jam*, the basketball games always felt like a good fit. Like its 2D forebear, it kept the rules simple and encouraged aggressive play. Unlike Midway's game, however, you also had some really fun skill moves and a three-on-three format.



ROCKET LEAGUE (2015)

A little more outlandish in terms of its content than the other games here, but in spirit, we think *Rocket League* is as much a successor to the legacy of *NBA Jam* as any other game here. Its fantastically simple mechanics, its emphasis on multiplayer, two-on-two action, the frantic scoring and explosive results, it's all there. That you happen to be driving around in cars is just an added quirk to the formula as far as we're concerned. And like all great arcade sports games, it's not losing its appeal with age.



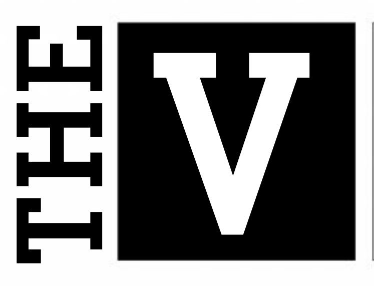
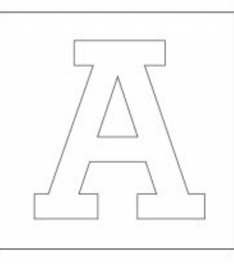
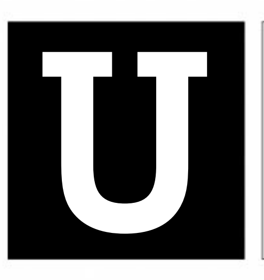
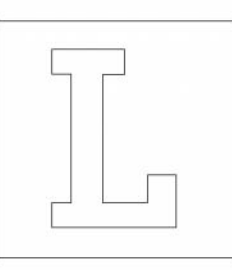
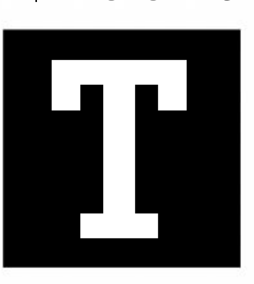
BLITZ: THE LEAGUE (2005)

A great intepretation of American football? Perhaps, but our real interest in Midway Games' licence-free gridiron experience was how it was willing to face down the nasty side of the game in an unrepenting way. *Blitz* tackled drug use, intentionally injuring opposition players and much more in its campaign mode, as well as offering some very accessible gameplay. The sequel released in 2008 built on those foundations well, alluding to even more real-world scandals while offering crunching pitch action.



EVERYBODY'S GOLF (2017)

Sony's ongoing golfing series doesn't have quite the insanity of some golfing games we could think of, even some supposedly taking the sport seriously, but it's always been colourful and empowering to play and last year's release was no exception. The approachable and simple three-tap swing mechanic is obviously a classic of the genre, well-implemented here with penalties for missing the optimum range. The courses are often complex and challenging, while the cast of golfers is odd and wonderful.

THE 

As you would expect from a modern gaming mouse, there are illuminated elements running up and down the device. The scroll wheel and the two angle lines on the side can have their colouring customised.

Unlike some illumination settings you don't need to just pick one colour or even just a few colours that rotate in and out. This mouse can actually have colour blends on its highlights.

This is a wired mouse rather than wireless and while many manufacturers are moving in the direction of bluetooth, we still often preferred a wired mouse for gaming. It just seems reassuring.

These side panels can be removed to reveal slots of additional weights to be added. The mouse comes with eight 4g weights that you can simply pop into a rubberised setting.

RIVAL 600

MANUFACTURER: **STEELSERIES** PRICE: **£79.99**

We've been using the SteelSeries Rival 310 for a long time now as we've found it to be one of the most accurate and comfortable mice around. As a matter of fact, all the Rival releases thus far have all be excellent, so it's no great surprise to find that the latest iteration is as good as ever. The question is that at £20 more expensive than our 310, does the Rival 600 offer enough of an improvement on what's already available?

Specs-wise they have a number of similarities, such as similar optical processing for the accuracy of your movement, but in other places it is far more advanced. What SteelSeries is calling its TrueMove3+ tech (previous models used TrueMove3) now incorporates two sensors rather than one, meaning that even when lifting your mouse, it is more capable of reading your directions. What this means in reality is that with depth perception the mouse doesn't need to be lifted by much for it to know you're moving the mouse for prepositioning, not to indicate movement.

The feel of the mouse is also greatly improved. The matte finish of the other Rival mice, which was already nice, has been upgraded with a soft-touch fibre-reinforced plastic, which has a really nice velvety finish to it. We'll be interested to see how that holds up against some intensive use over time, but other models from SteelSeries seem to manage wear and tear pretty well.

You also have some nice customisation options, and we don't just mean the lighting effects on the mouse (which are quite nicely done and not over the top). Panels on either side of the mouse can be removed and small 4g weights placed inside, adding up to 32g to the weight of the device. The panels themselves are held by magnets making them very easy to secure and remove.

It's fair to say, then, that the Rival 600 is a definite upgrade on previous models, improving the performance and feel of the mouse in significant ways. To save money you could look further down the range, but this is now the premier choice for us.

VERDICT 9/10

GAMING CLOTHING



MARIO 8-BIT LOUNGE PANTS

Playing a good Mario game is very much like slipping into a comfortable pair of lounge pants. Relaxing, familiar and warming to the soul, you can now partner that existential feeling with some literal Mario loungewear.
www.thinkgeek.com



SUPER MARIO WORLD T-SHIRT

As we write this, the design for this tee is actually on sale, which is good news. Hopefully that's still the case. Even if it's not, the design is great. It's the classic SMW art with Japanese text.
www.thinkgeek.com



STAR FOX 2 COVER T-SHIRT

We'll round off the Nintendo love with this rather excellent reproduction of the *Star Fox 2* cover art, as seen on the SNES Mini. We're pleased to see this excellent image given the shirt treatment it deserves.
www.thinkgeek.com

HOME FURNISHINGS FOR GAMERS



MARIO CHAIN CHOMP LAMP

PRICE: **$49.99**

Furnishing the gamer home has become a lot easier than it used to be with all sorts of fun and nerdy ornaments to pick from and this is a fine example of the form. The use of the chain as the stand for the chain chomp head lamp gives this piece a really active feel, as if it's about to lash out at you with its razor-sharp fangs. Thankfully this chain chomp is only interested in offering you illumination. We'd still be careful about replacing the bulb, though.
WWW.THINKGEEK.COM



MASS EFFECT GEEKI TIKIS

PRICE: **$9.99 EACH**

We're probably a little behind on the trends – we had to look up what tikis are, because we weren't 100 per cent sure. No massive surprise to find out that they're essentially cocktail mugs of a sort, originally inspired by Polynesian designs. These Mass Effect glasses depict fan faves such as Garrus, Tali and Jaal, which makes them nice decorative pieces as well us something fun to drink from. If you can find some Akantha to pour into them, all the better.
WWW.THINKGEEK.COM



OVERWATCH LOOT BOX COOKIE JAR

PRICE: **$39.99**

So, the whole loot box debate is a pretty heated one and we get why it matters to a lot of people. It matters to us too, because creating scales of gaming experience based on our ability to spend money in the game removes the skill-based meritocracy that has made gaming such a vibrant space for so many years. That said, we can still have a sense of humour about it, so we think putting some cookies in a loot box is a genius idea. Just so long as we don't need to pay in money every time we want to open it.
WWW.THINKGEEK.COM

MINECRAFT GRASS ACTIVITY BLOCK

PRICE: **$5.99**

Are you familiar with the concept of the fidget cube? They're kind of ingenious things, with each side offering a different little interactive mechanism for your hands to play with. They can be really helpful for anxiety and concentration in some cases and this is a nicely themed interpretation of that concept. The Minecraft Activity Block has six activities on it that let you rotate a pickaxe, slide around a pig, press buttons, squish a spawn egg, push a creeper and rub some dirt (slightly odd last one there).
WWW.THINKGEEK.COM





SNES/SUPER FAMICOM: A VISUAL COMPENDIUM

PUBLISHER: **BITMAP BOOKS**

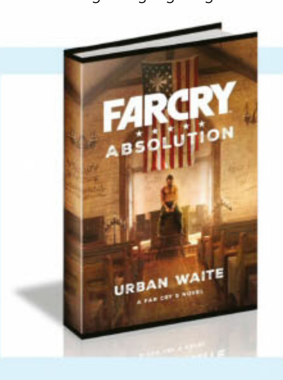
We have to say, with each passing publication Bitmap Books puts out in its visual compendium series, it appears to be growing in confidence and quality, and that's great to see. They've always been really fun and expansive celebrations of the games on each system they focus on, but this SNES-focused release is the best yet.

One reason for this is that the growing profile of the Bitmap Books series and the popularity of the SNES (recently voted the greatest console of all time by *Retro Gamer* readers) has attracted a lot more people to backing its books on Kickstarter and making sure it gets the additional funding it needs to put together a premium package. This SNES compendium comes with a hardcase sleeve and lenticular image as well as nine fold-out panoramic images highlighting some of the most popular or visually impressive games. Having been given the backing, the production value is there to see throughout the book.

And the content is getting better, too. On top of the spreads highlighting each game with a little write-up on them you will also find longer-form articles on the 16-bit era, company profiles on Enix, Hudson Soft, Acclaim and Square (to name a few), interviews with prominent developers, a look at homebrew games and more. The pixel art-driven approach of these books had always been a fine celebration of the form, but this book feels far more comprehensive and wide-reaching while still fulfilling its core objective as a visual compendium. And that's why it's so easy to recommend, particularly if you're a fan of this console in particular, which we're guessing most of you are.

www.bitmapbooks.co.uk

VERDICT **10**/10



FAR CRY: ABSOLUTION

If you're looking forward to delving into the chaos of Hope County and the lives of the people of Fall's End then this novelisation following local bartender Mary May Fairgrave and hunter William Boyd and their attempts to take on the Eden's Gate cult could be well worth looking at.

www.forbiddenplanet.com



DRAGON AGE: KNIGHT ERRANT

Following the events of *Inquisition*, we join elven thief Vaea as she arrives in Kirkwall to see roguish dwarf Varric appointed viscount, and to see her take on a local heist only for things to turn from criminal to dangerous. Another interesting expansion of the Dragon Age lore.

www.darkhorse.com

TALES FROM THE SEA OF THIEVES

Rare wants players to create the stories that will make *Sea Of Thieves* a world to remember, but helping things along with a book doesn't do any harm. This tome features yarns from captains within the world, telling of the trials, troubles and reward that can be found at sea.

www.titanbooks.com



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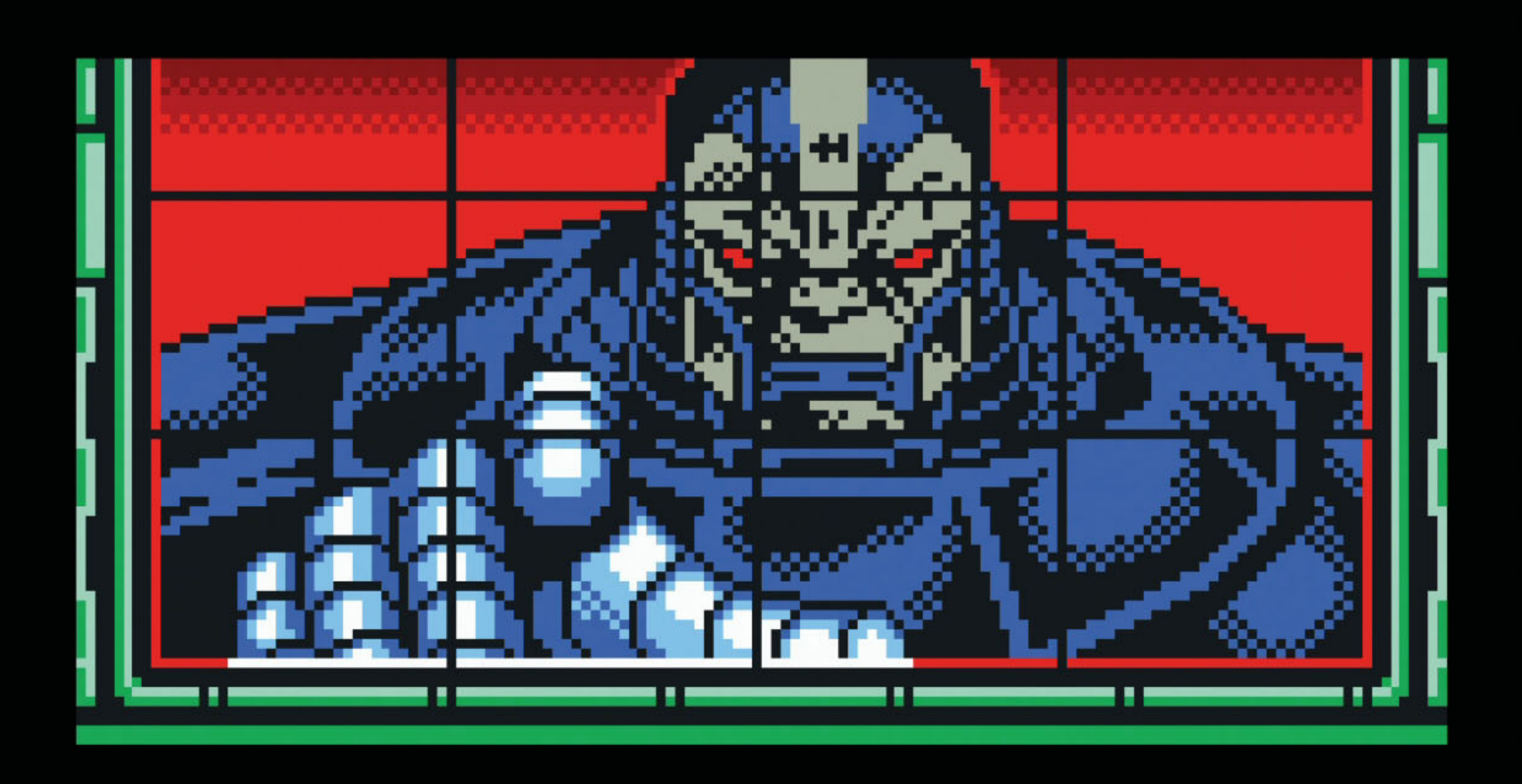
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